

Jesus, the Lord of Life and Death

The human race has achieved some rather amazing things, given that the average human is a mere 1.65 metres tall. He has conquered the soil of the ground. He has beaten back the barriers of the ocean, and scaled the highest mountains. He has beaten gravity, and flown in the atmosphere and even left it. He has conquered much regarding human sickness and ailments. He has tamed much of the animal world. He has discovered many principles of God's universe, and harnessed them for his own technology.

But of all these things, one thing remains unconquered. Man cannot beat death. There is no death vaccination. There is no pill which prolongs your life by five years every time you take it. This is why the Bible says – death is the last enemy. It is the biggest enemy, which still lays waste to all our achievements. Whatever you might achieve, whatever you might gain, you will at last come under death's power. Death is the great leveller. It cuts short our progress. It limits the power and influence of any one man. It forces your activity into a few decades. It casts its shadow over all human activities. It makes a mockery of a life lived solely for money, or for fame, or for knowledge, or for pleasure.

Think of it: death is the ultimate threat that anyone can use to coerce you. A man waving a gun at you would have no power over you if death could be defeated.

Whoever can conquer death has changed the very experience of human existence. Many people have tried and failed. There are scientists working right now on the problem of aging, and how to crack human immortality. Legends have grown up over the ages over a fountain of youth, or a nectar of immortality.

So if the Bible is true, and the Creator became man, we would expect Him to be able to conquer our greatest foe: death itself. If Jesus truly is the Son of God, the Messiah, He must deal with the ultimate problem: death. He must be able to reverse the curse.

We come to the demonstration of that in John 11. The Gospel of John is an elegantly designed book with two parts. The first part, sometimes called the Book of Signs, is a selection of seven miracles that Jesus did, that prove He is the Messiah, the Son of God. The second part, sometimes called the Book of Glory, is the account of Jesus preparing to return to His Father, teaching His disciples what that will mean, and then dying and rising for us.

The seventh sign is the ultimate sign. The ultimate proof that Jesus is the Son of God is a sign which shows that Jesus is the Lord of life, that Jesus is Lord over death itself. Of course, the One who controls death deserves our whole life. If Jesus overcomes our greatest enemy, then our faith and loyalty belongs to Him. You should place all your trust in Him.

If you believe Jesus is going to extend your life, then it changes how you live your life now. It changes who you live for. It changes what you live for. It changes how you live. John 11 becomes then a test of who you believe I the Lord life, and the Lord of your life.

The Jewish philosopher Spinoza said that if he could believe the raising of Lazarus, he would tear to shreds his system, and humbly accept the creed of Christians. There's good reason to believe it took place: the fact that there was a plot to put Jesus to death, the fact that John was an eyewitness, the fact that Mary, Martha and Lazarus were almost certainly among the 120 gathered on the day of Pentecost, and members of the first church in Jerusalem. Indeed, the town where this took place, Bethany, is today an Arab town with the name of Al-Eizariya, which means "place of Lazarus".

The account shows us three actions that Jesus took in the face of death, three actions which point to whether He is Lord of life and death.

I. The Lord of Life Deliberately Delays in the Face of Death

Now a certain *man* was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was *that* Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.

³ Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick."

In verse 2, John is actually telescoping ahead to something he records in chapter 12. But John probably expects that his readers have read Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in which it is recorded that a woman anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the leper. John tells us that it was Mary, the same Mary who sat at Jesus' feet while Martha served in the house. But John is the only Gospel-writer who tells us they had a brother named Lazarus.

They live in a town called Bethany, which is a town on the Mount of Olives just to the east of Jerusalem. Jesus will use this town as his base during the final week of his life.

In the previous chapter, we learnt that Jesus left the Pharisee hotspot of Jerusalem. He is likely east of the river Jordan, in Perea, the modern-day country of Jordan, quite a distance from them on foot – about 50 miles, or 90 kilometres. They send a message to Him. They don't formally ask Him to come, but they simply refer to the close relationship Jesus has with them, essentially asking for help.

⁴ When Jesus heard *that*, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was.

Now here are two confusing things. First, Jesus says this sickness is not unto death, when it seems it will be. Second, instead of speedily heading to Bethany, He deliberately delays two extra days. And in case we think this was through indifference or callous neglect, verse 5 gives us the reason for the delay: Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

How do we understand these? First, Jesus' statement about death clearly includes the idea that Lazarus will die, as we'll see in the next verses. Jesus knew Lazarus would die, and very likely, Lazarus was already dead by the time the messengers arrived. What Jesus means is that this sickness is not going to bring about Lazarus' final death, because of what Jesus is going to do. Death by sickness will not be how Lazarus's life ends.

Second, why the delay? Verse 4 tells us: this whole situation is for the glory of God. Lazarus was the chosen vessel to show forth the beauty and power of God in His Son, Jesus. This sickness was going to be a stage to show that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. But that meant Jesus was not simply going to heal Lazarus from a fever, or a delirium. Like a lion-tamer or snake-handler, the Lord of Life and Death is going to court death, bait it, let it strike. He is in such control of life and death, He can actually delay to let death in to do its work. In fact, His delay is timed specifically. We'll find out that by the time Jesus gets there, Lazarus will have been in the tomb for four days. It took about a day's journey from where He was to Bethany. Lazarus likely died shortly after the messengers left. They got to Jesus one day later. If Jesus had left immediately, it would have taken another day, and Lazarus would have been in the tomb for two days.

But common Jewish belief of the time was that the spirit was still in the body for three days, and then left. So by delaying exactly two days, and being there on the fourth, Jesus is making absolutely sure that no one thinks this is a mere resuscitation. You can't really add qualifying adjectives to the

word dead. But if you could, we would say Lazarus is *very* dead.

Two days later, it is time to go.

⁷ Then after this He said to *the* disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone You, and are You going there again?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

The disciples are surprised that Jesus would head back to the area where so many were trying to arrest Him and execute Him. Jesus responds by saying, if you walk during the daytime, you can see where you're going, but at night, you're liable to trip or fall and get hurt. In the same way, for Jesus to be in the will of His Father is to walk in the day. If he were out of the will of God, it would be like walking at night. The danger is not in circumstances; the danger is being out of God's will. Nothing can happen to Him outside the will of God, and if it is God's will for Him to heal Lazarus, then this is a daytime trip. Here's a principle to live by: the safest place to be is always in the will of God.

Having said that, He now prepares them for what they're about to see.

¹¹ These things He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up." ¹² Then His disciples said, "Lord, if he sleeps he will get well." ¹³ However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵ And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him." ¹⁶ Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."

Jesus uses the euphemism for death – *sleep* – but the disciples don't get it, until Jesus plainly tells them that Lazarus is dead. They don't yet understand what Jesus is going to do, so when Jesus says, let's go to dead Lazarus, Thomas says something that sounds loyal and courageous, though it may also just have been cynical and sarcastic. "Let's go and die with him."

The disciples don't yet see what we can see from our vantage point: Jesus is fully in control of life and death. He does not hurry or rush. He is never early, and never late.

God's delays in answering your prayers are not from reluctance. Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and He loves you. God's delays in changing that circumstance, bringing that deliverance are not from indifference. His delay was part of His planned response. God's delays are His perfect plan meeting our imperfect one; His perfect timing meeting our impatient timing, His superior plan meeting our inferior desires.

So what does this kind of Lordship call for from our hearts? What does this kind of calm control over death itself invite? Trust. Patience in the face of delayed answers to prayer. Putting off fretting and worrying and grumbling. Putting on contentment, serenity. Such is the control of the Lord of life that He can delay in the face of death.

His lordship over life and death is seen in a second way.

II. The Lord of Life Despises Despair Over Death

¹⁷ So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. ¹⁹ And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother. ²⁰ Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house.

After the journey from where Jesus had been, He and His disciples approach the vicinity of Bethany. Someone tells Him that Lazarus has been dead for four days, and someone tells Martha that Jesus is on His way. Martha leaves her house, where mourners are with her and Mary, and meets Jesus on the way.

²¹ Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to Him, "I know that 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, though he may die, he shall live. ²⁶ And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

Her first response is to say that had Jesus been there, this tragedy could have been prevented. But then she adds, with a glimmer of hope and faith, that even now, God could do something through Jesus. To that mustard-seed of faith Jesus says, Your brother will rise from the dead. She, not wanting to presume too much or read anything into Jesus' words, agrees that Lazarus will one day rise from the dead, as if they are simply reciting orthodox creeds.

But now Jesus pushes further. He gives one of His seven *I am* statements. We will not need to wait till the day of resurrection. I am the resurrection and the life. I do not simply give Resurrection and Life: I am it. I am Life and New Life. He did not merely make bread for the 5000, He said, I am the Bread, and you must eat me. In the same way, I am the Resurrection and the Life. You must believe and receive Me, not just what I do.

It's possible that those two metaphors explain the two statements in v25b and 26. I am the Resurrection: so if you believe in Me, then your eventual death will turn to resurrected life. I am the Life, so even if you are still physically alive, you will not face spiritual, eternal death.

I am both eternal physical life and eternal spiritual life. If I become your life, then you will never be separated from God, and one day, you will also have a resurrected body.

This is the grand story of Scripture: God promised Adam life through obedience. Disobedience brought promised death. The only way to overcome death is if death dies. Death dies when it is overcome by the Life, the Lord Jesus. The Life submits to death, offers Himself to it on the cross, overloads its circuits, overpays, floods the weed of death with so much water that it dies. Only the promised Messiah could meet the demands of the Law, die voluntarily on behalf of those who must die involuntarily, coming back to life not only with His own life, but with life to spare. So much life that it gushes, overflows.

He asks her if she believes it, and she confesses similarly to Nathanael in chapter 1, similar to Peter in chapter 6, and similar to the point of the whole book in 20:31: You are the Messiah, the Son of God, who has come into the world. Now this is the high point of faith in this passage, because the rest of the passage is mostly disappointing for the Lord of life.

²⁸ And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you." ²⁹ As soon as she heard *that*, she arose quickly and came to Him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met Him. ³¹ Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, "She is going to the tomb to weep there." ³² Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

Mary was doing the customary mourning, which was to remain in a seated position in the house for seven days, what is today called *sitting sheva*, with mourners coming to the house, bringing food, and being with you. Martha does not want the crowd of mourners to know Jesus has arrived, so she tries to secretly call Mary. But it doesn't work. When Mary gets up, they think she is going to the tomb, so they all follow her. She meets Jesus on the way, repeating what Martha had said, but this time, without the hint of faith that He could still do something.

³³ Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. ³⁴ And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!" ³⁷ And some of them said, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.

Twice here we read that Jesus groaned in the spirit (v33), groaned in Himself (v38). This word means a very strong emotion, usually one of displeasure. Verse 33 says he was troubled, which actually means to tremble, to shake. Verse 35, the shortest verse in the NT, we read of Jesus weeping. It's a different word than the word used for the weeping in verse 33, which meant a loud, demonstrative wailing. This was a quiet weeping. Why is He groaning, and weeping? Certainly on one level, the pain of the moment – what death brings, what Adam's sin brought to the world, the sting of death. But I think something else is going on here that is troubling Jesus, causing Him to groan, and weep. It is the unbelief and despair all around Him. Mary is weeping, seemingly without hope. The Jews who came with her are weeping without hope. They look at His tears and think He is grieving for His friend, but that can't be. He knows He is about to raise him – He said so "I go to wake Him". He is groaning over how little faith there is that the Life and Light of the world is present with them.

Even their statement is one of little faith and poor understanding. And some of them said, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying? Yes, He could have, but that is just the point. He did not have to try to beat death in a race, try to get there before death got there. His power was not merely limited to preventing death by healing illness. If this is indeed the Son of God, then He is Lord of life.

He had said earlier in the Gospel of John

²⁵ Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. (John 5:25)

²⁸ Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹ and come forth— (John 5:28–29)

The Lord of life expects a different response to death when He is there. He is distressed and disappointed and grieved by all the unbelief around Him.

This is why a Christian funeral is an altogether different affair from a non-Christian funeral. When those outside Christ grieve, they do so without hope. They believe that death is the never-ending way of life. They believe it's okay to be in despair over death – the person is gone and lost to us forever. They believe that there might be life after death, but no real victory over death. Death itself will never die. This is why Paul wrote: ¹³ But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have [died in Christ], lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

Jesus is rightly disappointed, grieved, distressed over not only what sin and death has done to His perfect world, but how humans respond with unbelief, despair and sorrow without hope.

The Lord's responses of delaying in the face of death and despising the despair about death are both merely the edges of His lordship over death. It is now that we see what the Messiah, the Son of God can do with death. Calvin commented "he is as a wrestler preparing for the contest; the violent tyranny of death that He had to overcome stands before His eyes"

III. The Lord of Life Defeats Death

³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been *dead* four days." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ Then they took away the stone *from the place* where the dead man was lying.

He arrives at the tomb, which appears to have been the horizontal rock hewn tomb which was typically owned by wealthier people. Up to this moment, not even Martha and Mary know what Jesus is doing. It was customary to visit the grave during the period of mourning. They likely thought He was there simply to weep. But then He gives the command to remove the stone. Martha is appalled. There will be the awful stench of death, the possibility of ritual defilement for everyone in the vicinity. And besides, why would Jesus want to go in and see his now embalmed, dead friend?

Jesus simply reminds her of His earlier call to her to believe in Him. She needn't understand how, or quibble with the method, or doubt the technique. She just needed to trust the Person, and she would see God's glory in His Son. The servants cooperate, and the stone, likely a large disc-shaped stone was rolled back. But it was not to let anyone in; it was to let someone out.

Instead of going in, as they expected Him, to, Jesus pray a loud public prayer.

And Jesus lifted up *His* eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. ⁴² And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said *this*, that they may believe that You sent Me."

Jesus prays in an interesting way. First, He addresses God as Father, which the Jews were not used to. Second, He doesn't ask for Lazarus' life. The prayer assumes He has already asked for that, and now He simply thanks His Father for the answer. Third, He is praying into the ears of those listening, and He says so, because He wants them all to know the source of this miracle. Who raises the dead? Who did Jesus pray to? Who worked through Him? And therefore who is Jesus?

⁴³ Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!"

Jesus is not muttering a quiet incantation. He commands, gives an order with full authority and power. He speaks to the dead, and the dead receive – all in one moment – the life to hear His voice, the life to understand, the life to obey. Someone pointed out that it was good that Jesus had said the name Lazarus before saying "come forth", for had He only said, come forth, perhaps multitudes would have come forth from the other nearby graves. The command is literally, "Lazarus, come out here!

Lazarus would have been covered with a large burial cloth twice his height, wrapped from the feet, over the head and then back down to the feet. The feet were tied at the ankles, and the arms tied to the body with linen strips. The face was bound with a cloth as well. Someone bound like this could probably hop or shuffle, but not walk.

We can imagine after Jesus shouted this command to the now-open tomb, the crowd of onlookers

shuffling, peering, murmuring to each other. The professional mourners have even stopped their wailing. A kind of expectant silence descends, broken only by some quiet talking, people looking at the tomb and back to Jesus, Mary and Martha next to him. Nothing happens.

And then, some muted noises. Shuffling. The sound of some gravel scraping. More shuffling. And then, piercing the pitch-black dark of the mouth of the grave: movement. Some women shriek. Others exclaim. Hands are over mouths, others are pointing.

⁴⁴ And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go." (John 11:33–44)

Now it is clear, the one who was dead is stumbling, getting up, groping as he can towards the light, still covered with the cloth, his face still obscured, arms and feet still tied. Jesus simply says, untie him. Jesus spoke and death was cured.

And from there Scripture goes silent. We can imagine, but we do not know the aftermath. Lazarus embracing an overcome Martha and Mary. Lazarus embracing the Lord Jesus. The responses of the sisters to Jesus. The crowd, some coming near to Lazarus but afraid to touch him, others so stunned they have sat down where they were. The professional mourners not quite knowing what to do now. All the questions we have also remain unanswered: what was it for Lazarus to be in Paradise those four days and to be called back, what was he like after this, and so on. These are not the point of the narrative. The point is to show us the highest point of Christ's ministry. Here is the fullest and greatest evidence of who Jesus is: the absolute Lord of life. Here is the final proof for those who are looking for proof of Jesus, short of His own resurrection. For those who were there, it is an crossroads of faith or complete rejection.

That crossroads appears to everyone who reads John 11. We find out that we who had made ourselves captives to dark powers through the fear of death have yet a second chance in Jesus.

Are you in fear of death? Do you live like someone with time running out? Are you treating your life like sand in an hourglass, something that is running out? Are you terrified of missing out in this life, terrified of your life being cut short, terrified of what will happen to you the moment you die – where you will go and what you will find?

Then you have not yet believed and received Jesus Christ as your life. You have not yet been freed by Him from the fear of death. To use His words, unless you believe in Him, you will die in your sins. You are still in bondage to the devil, living in the fear of death. For you this message today has one, single application: accept the Lord Jesus as your Saviour, and Lord, and new Life. Forsake your independence, and your self-made religion, and your sin. In your heart and mind, turn away from living for self and sin, and turn to your Creator, see the Son of God on the Cross, dying for you, and receive Him. Accept Him. Believe on Him.

But if this is you, then how has Christ's status as the Life changed your life?

If Jesus truly is the Resurrection and the Life, then can you trust Jesus and then live your own life? If Jesus truly is the Resurrection and the Life, should you live life as you please but expect Heaven when you die? If Jesus truly is the Resurrection and the Life, should you treat your own life as a private possession to be hoarded? No, as Paul said, "...He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. (2 Corinthians 5:15)

If death is not a threat for you, then fear of death goes away. If fear of death goes away, then slavery

to this world's system goes away. If slavery to the world goes away, then you are freest being on Earth, liberated to live out your God-give purpose. ¹³ For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (Galatians 5:13)

How you live your life has very much to do with what you believe about death. And that comes down to your belief and your relationship to the Messiah of the world, Jesus, Yeshua. Receive Him as your life, and banish the fear of death.