

“The Final Straw”

March 18, 2018

John 11:1-57

I. Introduction – Read John 11:1-16

Raising Lazarus from the dead is one of Jesus’ greatest miracles. Although this was not Jesus’ last miracle, the Apostle John selected this particular miracle as the final miracle of the seven he recorded because it was really the climatic miracle of Jesus’ earthly ministry. This miracle also seems to be the final straw that forced the Jewish leaders to act—Jesus had to die ASAP!

The primary purpose of this miracle wasn’t to restore Lazarus back to life, or to comfort his grieving sisters. As [verse 4](#) and [verse 40](#) both say, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead so that Jesus and the Father would be glorified. This is the primary theme of this miracle: that God the Father and God the Son be glorified. But there is second theme in this story—faith. Some form of the word “*believe*” is found at least 8 times in this record. In what Jesus said and did, He sought to strengthen the faith of three groups of people: His disciples, the sisters, and the Jews. The story began with some alarmed disciples.

II. The Raising of Lazarus

A. The Alarmed Disciples After the last confrontation with the Jewish leaders, John wrote in [John 10:40](#) that Jesus had gone “[across the Jordan to the place where John the Baptist had begun his teaching.](#)” This was about 20 miles from Bethany and 22 miles from Jerusalem. It was here that a messenger from Lazarus’ sisters, Mary and Martha, found Jesus and told Him the disturbing news that Jesus’ dear friend was very sick. If the messenger had traveled quickly with no delays, he could have made the trip in one day. John added that Jesus waited two more days before He left for Bethany. So, assuming that it took Jesus and His disciples one day to get back to Bethany, four days would have elapsed since the messenger had been sent. Since we find in [verses 17 and 39](#) that Lazarus had been dead for 4 days, this means that Lazarus had died the very day the messenger left to contact Jesus.

Because Jesus’ loved Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, the disciples must have been puzzled by Jesus’ response to the messenger and his message. John wrote, “[When he heard that Lazarus was sick, he \(i.e. Jesus\) stayed where he was two more days.](#)” But when Jesus did announce that He was returning to Judea, His disciples were alarmed. They knew it would be a life-threatening journey to be found in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Plus, they were leaving a fruitful ministry where they were.

Jesus tried to calm their fears by reminding them that He was on the Father’s timetable or schedule and that nothing could harm them. God the Father had given the Son a work to do and nothing could stop Him—Jesus was perfectly safe. Night, the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, would come at the precise time set by God’s eternal plan, and only then would the Lord “[stumble](#)” in death. Not only did the disciples

misunderstand the schedule, they misunderstood the reason for the visit. They said that “**if he sleeps, he will get better**”—i.e., “Let’s not bother going to Bethany.” This was just another example of their inability to grasp spiritual truth.

At that point, Jesus ended their confusion; in His omniscience “**He told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’**” The messenger had said that Lazarus was sick; there was no other way for Jesus to have heard that he had already died—except as God, He knew. Jesus didn’t say that He was glad that His friend had died, rather that He was glad He had not been there; for now He could demonstrate to His disciples His mighty power. The result would bring glory to God and would strengthen their faith. Jesus’ time on earth was nearing its end—in less than 3 months Jesus would be crucified—and the disciples definitely needed a powerful support for their faith.

If Thomas’ attitude was any indication, the faith of the disciples certainly needed strengthening. But in spite of his pessimism, we see Thomas’ love, devotion and courage. His pessimistic attitude led him to believe that he would die if they went to Jerusalem, but he was willing to go with Jesus into danger and risk his own life. His faith may have been weak, but his loyalty and courage were strong. So, despite their doubts, the alarmed disciples went with Jesus to Bethany and the grieving sisters.

B. The Grieving Sisters Turn to John 11:17-37. Since the climate was warm and the Jews didn’t practice embalming, it was customary to bury the deceased on the day of his death. The Jewish tradition at that time was that the soul of a dead person remained in the vicinity of the body “*hoping to reenter it*” for 3 days, but after 3 days decomposition would set in and the soul would leave. John wanted the reader to know that Lazarus was truly dead. The fact that the man had been dead four days gave greater significance to the miracle and greater opportunity for people to believe—only a divine miracle could restore Lazarus to life.

Hearing that Jesus was coming, Martha went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at home. For those that know Martha and Mary from Luke’s Gospel, the actions of the two sisters were not surprising, (Luke 10:38-42). Martha was the bustling, active sister; Mary was the quiet, introspective (deep-thinking) sister. As expected Martha rushed out to meet Jesus while Mary sat in the house weeping with her friends.

Since Mary later echoed Martha’s greeting, it is likely that the sisters often said these words to each other as they waited for Jesus to arrive. There may have been a bit of disappointment and grief in the statement, “**If you had been here, my brother would not have died.**” But there was also faith as Martha went on to say, “**But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.**” She may not have believed or even thought that Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead, but she was confident that through His prayers some good could still come out of this tragedy.

Jesus’ care and concern is seen in His reply to Martha, “**your brother will rise again.**” Jesus meant that Lazarus would be resurrected in the near future, but Martha missed the point. (*To be fair, how many*

other people had been resurrected 4 days after their death?) Martha probably assumed that Jesus, like the other mourners, was comforting her by pointing out that Lazarus would rise again at the end of the age. Challenging Martha to move from belief in the final resurrection to complete trust and faith in Him, “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’” Jesus didn’t deny what Martha said about the future resurrection. Jesus will raise the dead in the future resurrection, but He was also going to raise her brother immediately.

Jesus’ next two statements, “He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” teach two separate truths. 1) The one who believes in Jesus will live even if he dies physically because Jesus will raise him up on the last day. And 2) since “everyone who lives and believes” in Jesus has eternal life, they will never die spiritually; eternal life cannot be ended by physical death. This is why Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:55, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O grave, is your sting?”

When Jesus asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” He was challenging her to personally believe that He alone was the source of resurrection power and eternal life. Because of His love for Martha, Jesus pointed her to the only source of spiritual life and well-being; the only Way to eternal life—Himself. Martha didn’t hesitate to affirm her faith. She used 3 different titles for Jesus: Lord, Christ (or Messiah), and Son of God. Her words “I believe” really could be translated as “I have believed and I will continue to believe.”

We don’t know why Martha called Mary secretly. Maybe Martha hoped that Mary would have a private meeting with Jesus before the crowd of mourners spotted Him. But when Mary got up to go to meet Jesus, those with her thought she was going to the tomb to weep. Wanting to weep with her, they followed along. Imagine their surprise when instead they met Jesus!

Mary didn’t say much because she was overcome with sorrow and began to weep. Her friends joined in the weeping. The word used here means “to wail loudly.” Responding to this chaotic scene, John wrote that Jesus “was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” The Greek term for “deeply moved” suggests anger, outrage, or emotional indignation (Matthew 9:30; Mark 1:43; 14:5). One might say Jesus was “moved with anger.” He was angered at the ravages of sin and death in the world He had created. Perhaps He was also angered with the mourners who were acting like the pagans who have no hope. (In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul wrote, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.”) Not only was Jesus confronting the power of darkness, but He was surrounded by unbelieving grief and He was indignant over both. He was angered at the results of sin and death. He was angered at the lack of hope. He was also moved with sympathy for this suffering.

Jesus then asked, “Where have you laid him?’ Come and see, Lord.’ They replied.” Like the others, “Jesus wept.” But the word used here isn’t the one for loud wailing, like was used earlier, here the word

implies “*a silent bursting into tears.*” Jesus’ tears were tears of sympathy for those who were sorrowing at that point in time. As [Isaiah 53:3](#) says, He was “**a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.**” His tears were also for the results of sin and death in a fallen world. Perhaps Jesus was also weeping for Lazarus because He knew He was calling His friend back into a wicked world where he would one day have to die again.

The crowd wrongly assumed that Jesus wept because He loved Lazarus whose death was final. Knowing about Jesus’ healing power, they wondered why He could not have kept His friend from dying at all. But they were wrong to think that His tears reflected the same hopeless despair that they felt, Jesus grieved at the tomb because of sin which blinds people to the Truth.

C. The Miracle [Turn to John 11:38-44.](#) Before Jesus could perform the miracle, there were some minor problems. Actually, for God all problems are minor problems. The 1st problem was that when Jesus got to Lazarus’ tomb, the entrance was sealed with a large stone to keep grave robbers and animals out. 1st problem: There was a stone in the entrance. Jesus’ command to “**Take away the stone**” sent Martha into a state of panic. She didn’t understand that Jesus was going to raise Lazarus. Her concern was that after being in the tomb for four days, Lazarus’ body would have begun to decay and stink. This was the 2nd problem: Lazarus’ body smelled.

Martha probably assumed that Jesus wanted to take one last look at the body of His friend. She was horrified by the thought of seeing and smelling her brother’s decaying body. And she certainly didn’t want any of the mourners to see it either. In her mind it was too late for Jesus to do anything for Lazarus—He had come too late. This was the 3rd problem: Martha (and Mary) had both given up hope.

Jesus then reminded Martha that “**If you believe, you will see the glory of God.**” Jesus challenged Martha to stop focusing on things and to start focusing on Jesus; to believe in Him. Reassured by the Lord’s promise, Martha relented, and the stone was rolled away. Jesus didn’t really need help to move the stone, but He involved the bystanders so that there was no doubt that it was really Lazarus who was raised. The faith of all those watching was important.

Before performing the miracle, Jesus stopped to pray. Jesus prayed audibly to let the people know that what He was going to do was the will of the Father so that the Father would get the glory. He thanked the Father that He had already heard and granted Jesus’ request. Jesus prayed for the sake of the believing and the unbelieving spectators that they all might know that God had sent Him. This was a public declaration of Jesus’ mission and Jesus’ unity with the Father, which would be confirmed by the raising of Lazarus. Jesus spoke out loud so that the people might know that God had sent Him.

After the prayer, we see Jesus’ power: “**Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’**” This was a shout of authority and power. His voice would have gotten everyone’s attention. Some have speculated

that if Jesus had not addressed Lazarus by name, all the dead in the whole cemetery would have come forth. Obeying the voice of his Lord and Savior, “the dead man came out.” The onlookers must have stared in shocked amazement as Lazarus shuffled his way to the door of the tomb, “His hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.” It must have been a sight to behold as he stumbled forward on his own. Some of the bystanders probably fled in terror—bewildered and panicked by such a startling sight.

Jesus then gave those in the crowd an incredible opportunity to participate and to see that this was real as He commanded, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” Removing the grave clothes could have been part of the miracle, but in His sovereign wisdom, Jesus allowed some in the crowd to be part of His work. The very ones who had questioned what He was doing and who were witnesses to the power of Jesus took part in this miraculous happening.

D. The Response In the last part of John 11 we are told that the people were divided in their responses. John wrote in verse 45 that there were many who “put their faith in Him”—many believed. They not only saw with their eyes, but they also thought about what they had seen and what it meant. They drew the only right conclusion: Jesus is the Son of God.

But some didn’t believe; instead they went to the religious leaders, the Pharisees, and reported what had happened in Bethany. They were unbelievers before the miracle, and, incredibly, remained so afterward. These “informers” had been so near the kingdom of God, but their hearts would not yield to the truth and, for that reason, the grace of God would not—could not bring salvation. Alarmed by the news of the most astonishing miracle yet performed by Jesus, and understanding the effect it would have on the public, the Pharisees jumped into action. They didn’t have the authority to act on their own, so along with the chief priests, who were Sadducees, “the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.”

They weren’t seeking after the truth; they were seeking for ways to protect their own self-interests. If Jesus gathered too many followers, He would get the attention of the Roman authorities; this could hurt the Jewish cause—their cause. Despite their own admission that Jesus was “performing many miraculous signs,” they refused to believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Choosing instead to maintain their stiff-necked hypocrisy, they determined to eliminate Jesus. They had ignored the evidence when Jesus had healed the blind man, and they could ignore this evidence just as well. This was the final straw—the official decision that day was that Jesus must die. The leaders thought that they were in control of the situation, but it was God who was working out His predetermined plan (Acts 2:23). Their plan was to wait until after the Passover, but God had other plans.

III. Conclusion—*So what can we learn from these verses?*

No doubt the disciples were perplexed by several things. If Jesus loved Lazarus so much, why did He permit him to get sick? Or why did He delay going to the sisters? For that matter, couldn’t He have

healed Lazarus from a distance as He had healed others ([John 4:43-45](#)). John made it clear that there was a strong love relationship between Jesus and this family, yet Jesus' behavior seems to contradict this love.

God's love for those who belong to Him is not a pampering or sheltering love; it is a perfecting or maturing love. [Turn to Romans 5:1-5](#). The fact that God loves us and we love Him is no guarantee that we will be sheltered from the problems and the pains of life. As we've seen before, obeying God doesn't mean lack of problems or pain, but we can rely on God's promise in [Romans 8:28](#), "[We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.](#)"

One obvious thing about this story is something we may pass over quickly: as Martha and Mary were crying, Jesus did not say to Martha, "*If you believe in the resurrection, why are you wasting your time and your tears?*" He did not say to Mary, "*If you have victorious faith, you should stand clear-eyed and confident because I am here.*" No, Jesus didn't stop them, instead by joining them, He gives permission to all to grieve. Jesus gives permission to cry at death. It is all right to cry at death. It is right to describe death as terrible and painful and horrible without compromising the quality of our faith. Jesus Himself cried in anger at the wreckage death brought to one family. BUT death is a foe that Christ defeated in His death and resurrection

([1 Corinthians 15:50-57](#)). We must never stop telling those around us about the only way to have eternal life—the only way to have peace in the midst of sorrow. As [Philippians 4:7](#) says, "[And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.](#)" Jesus has defeated death so that His children can have peace.

Finally, just like those gathered at the tomb, everyone has to decide what to do with Jesus. Following the raising of Lazarus, some chose to believe. But, sadly, in spite of all they saw, some chose not to believe. Today everyone has the same choice—"Who do you say Jesus is?" If you choose to believe and make Jesus your Lord and Savior, you too can look forward to eternal pleasures in heaven. If you choose not to believe, Jesus said in [John 3:18](#), "[Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.](#)" Make sure you have chosen wisely.