

Letting Lazarus Die

Feminism has triumphed in our culture. The population of women possessing generational wisdom handed down by their grandmothers and mothers is depleted. The landscape shows the disintegration of a man-wise and children-wise womanhood. Therefore, it is left to church congregations and the few spiritually mature aged women in those congregations to salvage girls, women, wives, and mothers while there is time. However, this can only be accomplished if the woefully uninformed and unskillful possess the humility to receive truth from the pulpit and from the aged women in the congregation, and sadly, many of the uninformed and unskillful are not so willing. Let me illustrate. Have you ever thought about the deeper implications of why young and inexperienced mothers should be shown by aged women and experienced mothers why they most definitely should not pick up their newborn baby every time the child cries? They should not. It's about more than getting a good night's sleep. It's about the crucial lesson a wise mother teaches her child when the optimum opportunity window is open: that life is not all about you, and that mother will train her baby rather than her baby training her. There's an idea.

Then, getting past infancy to the toddler phase of life, there comes the crucial stage of beginning to teach your now mobile and profoundly curious child, whose verbal capabilities are germinating, the meaning of the word "no." And you know that there's a struggle over that because this is what the child will do: the child will look at you while they're about to do "no" to see whether you will enforce "no." Training, because it is not yet learning the meaning of the word "no," reaches way beyond the implications of immediate safety and danger to the child to yet another stage of life's lessons, in which the restrictions imposed by boundaries, limitations, and authority are added to the growing realization that mothers and fathers were not given by God to be manipulated and controlled but to train their child.

What a novel idea it is to some these days, who seem to think that a mother or father's job description can be summed up as facilitating whatever the child decides to do next, whatever the child chooses to do next, whatever the toddler wants, rather than engaging in the holy task of imposing the parents' will on the child and seriously training the child to habituate crucial life skills at certain times that cannot be learned well later on in life.

The process of training, then learning and growing, recognizing that foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, is a decades-long process, with children never reaching the stage in which parenting is no longer needed, though it is needed less frequently after adulthood is reached by a son or daughter who has lived that long. They still need to be parented, hopefully. However, your child will, somewhere along the way, come to Christ, being born again and adopted into God's family, and the rearing of the spiritual child will then be undertaken and best accomplished in a congregational setting by God, all the way to its completion in glory. In this way, families and churches complement each other, do they not?

It is within this substrata of truth in mind that God works in the lives of His children at all times and in different ways to instigate growth and maturity that I want to direct your

attention to the 11th chapter of John's gospel and Christ's raising of Lazarus from the dead. The chapter is long, 57 verses long, and is therefore too long for us to read in a worship service, but the chapter is somewhat familiar to many and is easily read and understood. Therefore, I will leave it to you to read when you get home today, perhaps reading it as a family at the midday meal or at dinner this evening. You would be a neglectful parent not to read this chapter to your children.

Help me, people, we're in this together. For now, I'd like to explore an aspect of the raising of Lazarus from the dead that I have not seen explored before but which promises to serve us well in coming to grips with God's program for growing up His children and presenting Himself through His children to the unsaved who observe God's dealings with His people. God presents Himself to lost people through you. Is that getting done?

Specifically, I want to address this matter of the Lord Jesus Christ letting His beloved friend Lazarus die. Perhaps you have suffered the sudden and unexpected loss of a loved one. We once had someone in our church who first lost his mother and then lost his caregiver when he was a child to cancer, with devastating results that I think he has not yet recovered from, decades later. Others have lost beloved family members to illness or violence at a young age. I have mentioned before an aunt and uncle who lost a young child to a sudden illness, with our family agreeing that my uncle never got over the loss of his baby girl. He never got over.

Some who are Christians wrestle with feelings of betrayal by God when such tragedies strike. I know families where one family member blamed another family member when a third family member was killed, and he was a criminal. Others who are not Christians sometimes respond by questioning whether there be a God. If this happened, how could there be a God? And they do that, of course, as a coping mechanism for something they either do not understand or are determined to disagree with.

The 11th chapter of John's gospel speaks to anyone who has suffered such a loss and searches for meaning about what happened, but such casting about for meaning usually, when a person is casting about for meaning over the loss of a loved one, the search for meaning almost always centers on themselves. How predictable. "God, how could you take my child? God, how could you allow my dad to be killed?"

I propose explanations from an entirely different perspective than is usually taken, assuming at the get-go that it is not all about you and it is not all about me. To accomplish this, I propose to do what I have so many times urged you to do on past occasions: ask the right questions. It is unlikely you will find the right answers unless you ask the right questions. Most people not only do not ask the right questions, they give little thought to the importance of asking the right questions, like it's not a big deal. Excuse me, it's a very big deal.

As we consider Lazarus, ask yourself two questions. First, why did the Lord Jesus Christ allow a man to die He could have easily healed? It's that hard for Him? And second, what might the Lord Jesus Christ have been seeking to accomplish by allowing Lazarus to die and then, after four days, raising him from the dead? What's the point?

If you have already experienced such a loss, this message may not be for you. It may be that you are too deeply invested in the victim mentality, feeling that you are a person who has been wronged by God, for anything that I say this morning to be useful to you.

However, if you are undecided about understanding your loss, or you have not yet suffered a heartbreaking loss, perhaps consideration of what the Savior accomplished by allowing Lazarus to die will shed light on what might lie back of God's purpose in your loss.

Do I believe that there was a purpose in God allowing my mother to die 15 minutes before the arrival of the man she was determined to listen to? I think there was. Letting Lazarus die, I suggest nine reasons why the Savior chose to let Lazarus die.

This is not a service you should disturb while I'm preaching by quietly leaving, except in an emergency. Please do not get up and leave while I'm preaching unless it is an emergency, because this is important.

First, the Savior let Lazarus die to demonstrate His sovereignty. Are we clear about what sovereignty entails, what sovereignty means? One credible authority suggests that sovereignty is the biblical concept of God's kingly, supreme rule and legal authority over the entire universe. God is boss. God's sovereignty, expressed, exercised, and displayed in the divine plan for and outworking of salvation history. Divine sovereignty is emphasized, especially in the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition, where it is paradoxically contrasted with human responsibility. That's what one guy wrote.

The late Peter Connelly, father of my very good friend Ken Connelly, listed several men's definitions of sovereignty in his book *First Steps in Christian Theology*. Three-sided statements for you. First, sovereignty is said by one man to be the consistent moral purpose by which all the events of the universe are determined, and of which, when taken in their theological connection, they are the expression, and he continues on. Next, sovereignty is explained as the end in view in the sovereignty of God is doing God's will. Finally, with sovereignty, nothing hinders God from doing what He pleases. If I may be so bold, I understand sovereignty, whether it applies to the triune Godhead, the Father, the Spirit, or the Son of God, to refer to the right to exercise the divine will and to be accountable to no one, answerable to no one, hindered by no one, except that this sovereignty of God is exercised in complete harmony with the other persons of the Trinity.

Why would the Lord Jesus Christ allow Lazarus to die? One reason for doing so was to establish that He had the right to do so, and that He is not answerable to you, and that He is not answerable to me, and that He's not answerable to anyone else. He is God; therefore, He is sovereign. And that ought to be good enough for any believer, with our Lord pressing His sovereignty home to both Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. They tried to hold Him accountable, and He would have none of it.

What was Job's exemplary response when he was informed that his sons and daughters were suddenly killed? Job loved his kids as much as you love yours, if not more. And in Job 1:20-21, we read, "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." You're not going to have that kind of reaction unless you plan to have that kind of reaction. You decide ahead of time, when tragedy strikes, what will I say, what will I do?

Next, the Savior let Lazarus die to exhibit His omniscience. When Lazarus took sick, the Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles were on the other side of the Jordan River, in the region known as Perea. The messenger dispatched by his sisters, Mary and

Martha, informed the Lord, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick" (John 11:3). Interestingly, the Lord did not respond by traveling straightway to the bedside of Lazarus, who He loved (verse 5). He waited two days before responding (verse 6). Why did He tarry? In addition to demonstrating that He could tarry, why did He tarry? He waited, in part, so He could inform His men that, quote, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth" (verse 11). However, because they misunderstood, He clarified what He meant by saying unto them plainly, "Lazarus is dead" (John 11:14). By allowing Lazarus to die, which He did by delaying His response for two days, our Lord demonstrated that He knew something He could not otherwise have known—that Lazarus had died—unless He was omniscient, unless He possessed all knowledge. More important than healing His friend Lazarus, apparently, it was.

Third, the Savior let Lazarus die to expose His disciples' loyalties. Do you have perfect understanding of your surface and underlying loyalties? Do you? I don't. As a matter of fact, I'm sure I don't, and I'm not sure that you do either. Remember when Peter bragged on the night of our Lord's arrest that he would never be offended by the Savior? "I'll never be offended by you." Yet, what do we read in Matthew 26:33-35? Peter answered and said unto Him, "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended." Jesus said unto him, "Verily I say unto thee, that this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice." Peter said unto Him, "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee." Likewise also said all the disciples. Sometimes it takes more than a single event to expose your true loyalties so that you clearly see what they are, what is truly in your hearts. In John 11:8, our Lord's disciples very nicely warned Him of the danger of crossing the Jordan River and entering Judea to come to the home of Lazarus, and their concern for Him was commendable. "Oh, it'd be dangerous for you to go there." Okay, thank you. It was encouraging for Thomas to say, after they had explicitly told Lazarus's dead, "Let us go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). Talk is cheap, isn't it? "Let's die with him." For all the nice words spoken on the far side of the Jordan River, on the night that our Lord was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter denied Him three times, and the whole band of remaining apostles fled for fear, while Thomas was determined to deny the Lord had risen from the dead until eight days had passed and he saw Him in person. It was in the dark hours after His crucifixion and before His resurrection that the apostles of Jesus Christ began to comprehend their spiritual weakness to a degree that they had never before understood. Had they intended to be loyal? Yes. But were they loyal? No. All flesh is flesh, and no one in the flesh has strength before or after conversion. Thus, allowing Lazarus to die was part of the Savior's plan to show His men their utter dependence upon Him and His grace to live their lives. On that occasion, He began to expose their deep-seated and genuine loyalties. So, He let Lazarus die.

Fourth, the Savior let Lazarus die to reveal inner thoughts. You and I are no different than our Lord's disciples in many respects. Peter thought himself committed and loyal, Thomas thought himself committed and loyal, the others felt the same to one degree or another, but were soon shown their weakness and their inconsistency and their inability to be loyal to their Savior. Your loyalty is just as dependent upon the grace of God as theirs was. Yet another reason for letting Lazarus die was to reveal the inner thoughts of still other followers, Mary and Martha, among the most devoted disciples of Christ.

What did Mary and Martha come to learn about their own thoughts with respect to their Master only after their brother Lazarus had died? There were things I never learned until after my mom died. There were things I did not know until after my dad died. And the same is true of you, just as it was true of them. Some things about you are things you will not learn until someone close to you dies. Listen to what Martha said upon meeting the Lord as He came to where her brother Lazarus was buried, in John 11:21: “Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.” Now listen to what Mary said minutes later when she approached the Savior, in verse 32: “When Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.”

They were blaming Him. What thoughts did the Lord Jesus Christ expose in the hearts of Martha and Mary that would not otherwise have come to light but by letting Lazarus die? They both questioned their Lord’s motives when He did not do for them what they wanted Him to do, what they expected Him to do, what they demanded that He do. It is important to you, and for you, to discover doubts you have about the Savior’s goodness, about God’s wisdom, and the choices made for you that result in personal pain and heartache. It is good for you and for me. If you are not settled that God is always good, and that the Savior is always on your side, no matter what He decides to do, then it is in your best interest to learn of that ugly sin of unbelief, so that you can deal with it, repent of it. Thus, Martha and Mary were spiritually benefited by the Lord’s decision to let their brother Lazarus die. That doesn’t fit into some people’s minds, but it’s true.

Fifth, the Savior let Lazarus die to vent His anger. Notice the last phrase of John 11:33, where John tells us the Savior “groaned in the spirit, and was troubled.” The word translated “groaned” is the Greek word *embrimaomai*, and it literally means to snort as an expression of anger. Were this not allergy season, I would snort for you, but I’m afraid to snort for you because it’s allergy season, so you could understand. It refers to the Lord Jesus Christ being deeply moved as a result of feeling very strongly about something. What’s the result? He had—think about this—He’d been around dead people before. Perhaps the Lord’s anger was vented after what He saw: Mary and the Jewish people that accompanied her to where Lazarus was buried, they were weeping. Maybe that’s what angered Him. He just got tired of it. Maybe the Lord Jesus Christ chose that occasion to demonstrate His humanity, His anger against the wages of sin being death, and His disgust at the pain and suffering brought on by sin in the lives of people that He loved and cared about. He didn’t like it.

Whatever the precise reason for our Lord’s display of anger, it was a reason that would not have presented had He not allowed Lazarus to die, and by His friend’s death, allowed Mary and Martha to grieve. So, remember, He is touched with the feelings of our infirmities, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). This hurt Him, He felt it, and He didn’t like it. Is it beneficial for the Savior to show that He is touched with the feelings of our infirmities? Then it was beneficial for Him to let Lazarus die, to let the sisters weep and mourn, and to show His feelings in that way, shown on no other occasion.

Sixth, the Savior let Lazarus die to demonstrate His love. This is the easiest assertion to make, because it is so clearly stated in John’s gospel and was so obvious to the Jewish people who had gathered to mourn Lazarus. Those people, of course, would not have gathered to mourn Lazarus had he not died. In John 11:5, the statement was

made by the gospel writer: “Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.” Statement of fact. However, in John 11:33 and verse 35, the Lord’s display of anger (translated “groaned”), the fact that He was troubled, and their observation that He wept on that occasion, caused those attending to conclude for themselves, verse 36: “Behold, how he loved him.”

Reminding you again that the mourners would not have gathered for a Lazarus who had not died, would not have been disposed to come to their home solely to meet and hear the Lord Jesus Christ speak. They therefore would not have witnessed the scene that convinced them beyond doubt that this Jesus of Nazareth loved their friend, truly loved their friend Lazarus. Keep in mind that Lazarus’s friends arrived at their conclusion about the Savior’s love *after* Lazarus died and *before* the Savior raised him from the dead. Thus, the entire scenario that unfolded, that culminated in Lazarus being raised from the dead, would not have happened had the Lord Jesus not allowed Lazarus to die.

Seventh, the Savior let Lazarus die to display God’s glory. You say, “What?” Yes, to display God’s glory. Take a look, see what the Savior said to Martha as the two of them stood at the mouth of Lazarus’s tomb, and after He had ordered the stone to be rolled away, though she protested in verse 39 that Lazarus had been dead for four days and the body would stink. The Lord Jesus said, in verse 40: “Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God.” What precisely was meant by this reference to her seeing the glory of God doesn’t really matter. The fact is that she *did* see the glory of God in some way when her brother was called forth from the tomb. And not only Martha, but everyone else who was there was witness to the fact.

Do we need reminding that the very reason of our existence is God’s glory? Revelation 4:11: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.” And don’t forget Ephesians 3:21: in this congregation called Calvary Road Baptist Church, and throughout eternity, “Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.” If God is somehow glorified by the death of an individual—and He is—should we protest that person’s death? If God is somehow glorified by my own death, or by yours—and He will be—do we have any business protesting our deaths? No. To this end were we created, people: to glorify God. We glorify Him by living, we glorify Him by dying, and whether the person who dies is a believer or unbeliever, God will somehow receive glory in that person’s death, somehow.

This is not to say that we should not grieve the loss of loved ones. This is also not to say that we are not agitated about the tragedy and heartache of sin and death. It’s an outrage, of course it is. But to question the Savior’s motives, the Savior’s goodness, the Savior’s love, the Savior’s wisdom, or the Savior’s mercies—that, friend, would be wrong.

Eighth, the Savior let Lazarus die to show His relationship with God the Father. I began reading from John 11:41: “Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.” And when He

had thus spoken, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus said unto them, "Loose him, and let him go." Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on Him.

Verses 41 and 42 provide us with an example of both vertical and horizontal praying. You know that often, when people pray to God, they're not really praying to God as much as they're praying for their audience listening to them, right? Because they're praying out of the side of their mouth, right? And sometimes that is not at all good, but not always. Here, we have an example of the Savior praying to His heavenly Father for the express purpose of informing the bystanders who heard Him, and His purpose was so the bystanders would believe that He had been sent by the Father. And what clinched the matter in people's minds, of course, was when He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" and he that was dead came forth. Then many of the Jews which came to Mary and had seen the things which Jesus did believed on Him. Would the Savior have been able to show His relationship with the Father in that way apart from the death of Lazarus? No way. Thus, it was not only beneficial for the Lord Jesus to let Lazarus die; it was vital that He let Lazarus die to show His relationship with the Father. How can anyone begrudge Him that?

Ninth, the Savior let Lazarus die to work a miracle. We recognize that you cannot raise someone from the dead who has not died. Therefore, in order to raise Lazarus, the Lord had no option but to let His beloved friend die. Did allowing Lazarus to die cause pain, cause heartache, cause disappointment, and severely try the faith of Mary and Martha? Well, of course it did. Of course it did. But all of that was more than offset by the beneficial results that came about as a consequence, especially the great miracle that was also a sign: the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

Let me rehearse the related details of Lazarus's death and resurrection. The events occurred so close to the end of our Lord's earthly ministry. The events took place in Bethany, so close to Jerusalem as to be in that city's backyard. The man had been dead for four days when the Savior brought him back to life. The crowd of witnesses accumulated to memorialize his death would not have laid there otherwise for any reason. And their eyewitness testimonies, coming as they did from the Lord's adversaries—they were His adversaries who saw this—and their testimonies could not be denied. This made the raising of Lazarus the most important miracle the Lord ever worked until He rose from the dead Himself. It could never, after that, be denied, except by those with determined spiritual blindness, that the Lord Jesus Christ was sent by the Father, that He had power to raise the dead, and that He was capable of great compassion and determined love for His own.

How dare anyone impugn His motives or question His wisdom after considering what transpired in John chapter 11? I close with this: if you have ever held in your heart anything like the challenging assertion of Mary and Martha, resulting from the sudden loss of a loved one, whereby you question God's motives, whereby you question God's love, whereby you question God's wisdom, whereby you question God's mercies, or anything else related to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, then I challenge you to fall on your face in heartfelt repentance for your great sin. You sin greatly.

For 2,000 years, we have had within reach proof positive that the Lord Jesus Christ is not arbitrary; He is not unloving; He is not unwise; He is not without compassion; He is not without proper intentions; and He is not without both the power and skill to accomplish for God's glory things we cannot even begin to wrap our minds around. It would be, for the rest of their lives, if not throughout eternity, that Mary and Martha would remember their comments to the Savior—"If you had been here, our brother had not died"—as not only profoundly ignorant statements, but on the very edge of blasphemous statements, for calling into question the knowledge and wisdom of the one they owned as Lord.

Let us therefore be very careful to recognize our severe limitations as we survey this chapter, that exposes so clearly the limitations of two godly women who loved their brother and who loved their Savior, but who allowed their emotions and their ignorance to get away from them. And if you have not yet lost a loved one, you will. When that day comes, no matter how surprising your painful loss may be, be careful that you guard your mind, guard your heart, and guard your mouth. People are listening.

Jesus Christ is God. He chose to let Lazarus die, though His reasons for His inaction were not understood by either Mary or Martha. Just because they did not understand why He seemed to initially do nothing, so that their brother died, does not mean He had no reasons. But His reasons are His business.

What can we learn from our vantage point of 20 centuries afterward, and with the completed revelation of God's word in our hand to study? Here are the Lord's reasons, repeated again for you: to demonstrate His sovereignty, to exhibit His omniscience, to expose His disciples' deepest loyalties, to reveal His followers' innermost thoughts to them, to vent His anger, to demonstrate His love, to display God's glory, to show His relationship with God the Father, and to work a great miracle.

What do we take away from John chapter 11? Might I suggest that we take away the propriety of mourning our loved ones' loss—there's nothing wrong with mourning the loss of loved ones—but that we recognize the impropriety of ever questioning or in any way challenging our Savior's execution of His divine plan for our lives and for the lives of our loved ones. Let us not ever go there. Amen.

Let's stand for prayer, shall we? Father, we thank you for the word of God. We thank you for John chapter 11. We thank you for the clarity with which we can see what they did not, with feet on the ground, who were there at the time, did not fully realize or understand. You are good, You are gracious, You are merciful. Your Son is wonderful. He is a truly sufficient Savior, and I pray that you might help us to better appreciate Him, and that you might work in the lives of those who do not know Him, that they would trust this one who is worthy. And for that, we thank and praise you, in Jesus' name. Would you take your hymnal, please, and turn to hymn number 58?