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Called to life...the death of Lazarus (3/29/15)

Have you ever been to a 3-D movie? If you have then you know that without these glasses the screen seems a little blurry. You know what's going on but it is not visually inviting. Then you put on the glasses and everything becomes clear. Suddenly there is depth and color and clarity. Objects seem to be coming out of the screen and everything seems more real. Of course things are not real, it's still just a movie, but those glasses give you a more accurate perspective on what is real. In our passage today and next week, Jesus shows His disciples some things that can't be seen with the naked eye.

There are the stories we live but there is a bigger story we live into. Faith enables us to see the bigger story. God wants to expand our faith so we can see past this flat, one-dimensional, low-def, temporary earth-bound experience to see the glories of the eternal life to come. When that day arrives, we won't need faith. We will no longer see through a glass darkly. But, for now, we walk by faith and not by sight. Faith is the gift God gives us here on earth so we can put things in perspective. And we need perspective. We need a pair of glasses to help us see past the blurry images of life especially when bad things happen to us. Faith reminds us that even the most tragic circumstances can result in God's glory and our good.

The setting for John 11 is God's favorite place on earth, Bethany, a small town outside Jerusalem. As the chapter begins Jesus is staying out in the desert of Perea, away from the hostile grasp of the religious leaders in Judea. His friend Lazarus is sick, seriously sick. The characters in this chapter exhibit a narrow, predictable perspective on life and death that leads to a number of nagging questions about God. These may sound familiar.

1. Does God know about my situation? (vv. 1-3). Mary and Martha send word to Jesus about their brother's condition. They didn't go probably because the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was dangerous for a woman or maybe they needed to stay and care for Lazarus. Jesus not only knows about Lazarus' condition but He knows how it's going to turn out...v. 4

Could there be a more tragic character in all of literature than Lazarus? This poor guy has to endure death twice! But Lazarus demonstrates that sickness and even death can showcase the glory of God. That's what life is about –

the glory of God. God is going to get His glory. So, if you are going through something hard start looking for God's glory.

We often pray for God's healing but do we pray for God's glory? The truth is that even if God does heal it is only a temporary reprieve. "The wages of sin is death" and one out of one people die. We are merely postponing the inevitable. Seek the glory of God in every circumstance.

2. Does God care about my pain? (vv. 5-6). What a strange statement. Jesus loved Lazarus - so He stays two more days where He is. How is this love? The response of Mary and Martha to their brother's fatal illness is understandable and expected. What is unexpected is the response of Jesus. He loved this family so much that He did nothing? How is this a loving response to good friends? Is it possible that Jesus has something in mind that the sisters cannot fathom? Jesus will use these circumstances to increase the faith of His disciples. Before the day is over they will see Him as they never have before. Their vision will improve as their faith grows.

When we encounter difficult circumstances it helps to remember that God's delays are not denials.

3. Is God able to prevent these difficult circumstances? The narrative now focuses on the disciples who have no desire to go anywhere near Jerusalem because Jesus and His disciples are on the Pharisee's "Most Wanted" list. They have already tried to stone Jesus (10:31) but He escaped. Now they want to arrest Him (10:39-40). So the disciples object to going back to Bethany...v. 8.

Jesus responds by comparing his return to Judea to walking in the sunlight...vv. 9-10. As long as Jesus was carrying out the will of His Father, He was walking in the daylight. He would be kept safe. He had miraculously escaped death more than once, and was confident about returning to Judea. Jesus lived in full obedience to the Father, who is light. If God the Father was leading Jesus to return to Judea and He disobeyed then he would have been in the dark, and that is when he could have stumbled. He walked in the light of God in order to be the light of the world.

If you are committed to do the will of your Father then you too are indestructible until the day God has appointed for you. God determines the day of our death.

4. Can God turn things around? If you know how the story ends you know that death is not irreversible. That's the message of Easter. But they don't know that yet. Jesus uses Lazarus' death as an invitation to believe...vv. 11-15. Jesus says, "Lazarus is dead and I am glad." What? "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there so that you may believe." Now the picture is becoming clear. There is a fate worse than death. It's dying without faith. It is dying without knowing the One who has authority over sickness and death. Everyone dies but those who trust in Jesus will see the curse of death reversed and live forever. If Lazarus had not died then everyone could say, "He was pretty sick but he recovered." All of us get sick but we usually recover. But Lazarus was dead. You don't recover from that. Or do you? That's why we need to put on our glasses.

For those who lack faith, tragedy sends them scurrying for answers to these kinds of questions. But when we have faith we begin to see that every circumstance of life can result in God's glory and our good. No matter how dark your circumstances trust in God and you will see the light of His glory. As Corrie Ten Boom once said while imprisoned in a concentration camp, "There is no hole so deep that God is not deeper still."

Palm Sunday is a good example of seeing the greater reality beyond our earthly circumstances. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, people waved palm branches to welcome their Savior. He was the one who would deliver their nation from the oppression of the godlessness of Rome. There were some disappointed people at that parade. Jesus was a far cry from the King they anticipated. Riding on a donkey, unarmed and without an army, wearing humble clothes. How could this be the King who would sit on David's throne forever? But there was more to this parade than meets the eye. These worshipers were rehearsing for a scene to be played out at the end of time.

"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen, blessing and glory and wisdom and

thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen.” Rev. 7:9-12

In a similar way, the life we live today is only a shadow of the glory to be revealed in that day. The pain, the heartbreak, the tragic losses we experience in this life all cause us to wonder, “Does God know? Does God care? Couldn’t God have prevented it? Can He turn things around?” The good news is that the answer to all these questions is yes. Some day, when this movie is over, we will understand the plot. But for now, we need to put on faith. As that great American theologian Garrison Keillor once said, “A little faith will see you through. What else will do except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees and have faith that all this wolfing is not the last word.”

In spite of their grief and confusion about the events surrounding Lazarus’ death, the sisters got one thing right that I want all of us to get right today. When they first sent word to Jesus they appealed to Him with these words, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.” Did you catch that? They didn’t say, “Lord the one who loves you is sick. You know, the one who loves you and has been your faithful friend through thick and thin? The least you can do to repay his love for you by healing him.” They seem to know that it is not our love for Him that will get us through but His love for us.

It is not our love for Jesus that gives us the confidence. It is not our ability to hold onto faith when he feel like life is falling apart. Our confidence is not in our love for Him but His love for us.

So this is a test. All of life is a test. Will we live out our lives on this planet just eating popcorn while staring at blurry images on a screen wishing we knew what was going on? Will we now go about our business until some tragedy occurs and we’re left wondering “why?” Or will we “trust in the Lord with all our hearts, leaning not on our own understanding but in every circumstance of life acknowledging who He is?” If you do that then He will make your crooked path straight, your blurry vision clear and your faith will become sight.