

XXIV. Personal Evangelism in Biblical Perspective
iShare—Encounters with Jesus in John's Gospel
“An Encounter With Lazarus, Martha, And Mary At Lazarus’ Death”
John 11:1-37
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August 19, 2012 – Morning Sermon

We continue in our iShare series and this text in John 11 concerning the matter of Lazarus’ death and our Lord’s instruction will be covered in two studies, this one and the next. I will open this study by reading the first four verses. This is the Word of God. It’s the Truth. John 11:1-4 says [1] *Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. [2] It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. [3] So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” [4] But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

I’d like to take a look at this distillation of God’s Word through the shorter Catechism about the death of a believer. Question 37 says, what benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? The answer is the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.

This text in John 11 records an astounding event, narrative. It is one that is very pointedly placed in John’s Gospel. One way to look at John’s Gospel is a Holy Spirit inspired, evangelistic, and discipleship booklet. In other words, unlike the other Gospels, the Gospel of John has a very specific purpose. That’s why two thirds of it deals with the last week of the life of Jesus. John tells you the purpose of why the Holy Spirit led him to write this in John 20:31 which says [31] *but these are written so that you may believe (evangelistic) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing (discipleship) you may have life in his name.* He has arranged this that you might believe and grow in your faith.

He has specifically put it together. He selects seven miracles and seven titles for Jesus. He puts in seven requests in the High Priestly prayer of John 7. There are so many things that John has put in here and we have arrived at the crowning miracle that John places before Jesus goes to the cross – the death and resurrection of Lazarus. I want to do this entire text in one sermon but I just couldn’t do it. There are multiple things that the Lord is saying in this text. This text is so important and in this study we’ll learn what we need to know about the death of Lazarus and in the next study we’ll learn more about the death and resurrection of Lazarus. This text is absolutely crucial in what it is saying.

God’s Word equips us for everything in life but there is one area we avoid talking about with any sobriety even in pulpits and that’s the matter of death. Therefore with the death of believers there is this retreat into sentimentalism. I know our motivations are right but the reason we don’t know what to say is we have avoided the subject studiously. The Bible doesn’t avoid it all. I don’t know of a text that brings more clarity to the issue

of how we are to view and respond to the death of believers that this text in John 11. I don't know of a more profound text.

So let me start highlighting this text by asking you a couple of questions. When a loved one dies and you pray for the Lord to heal them but they die, do you in the death of that believing loved one, just under the surface question the Lord? Lord, I thought You loved me. I thought You loved them. How could You let them die? Far be it, how could You have appointed their death? Lord, how could that possibly be congruent with Your love for us? Here is a second question. If per chance your loved one who has died, you could bring them back into this life, would you? Should you? What does the Bible have to say to this?

God has called pastors to labor in the Word of God so that these subjects are not avoided. I understand that as you grow a big church you don't advertise sermon series on death but to be a faithful pastor we need to pray for God to raise those pastors up. You need to ask the Lord to give me the ability to address this so that when these moments come and your moment comes, if Jesus does not come first, is that the absence of the affection of Jesus? Did He somehow miss something? Does He love you and your loved one?

This is an astounding event and it's only recorded in John. It's the crowning miracle that will lead into a few days the death and resurrection of Christ. It has a very specific purpose in pointing to that direction. In fact, it accelerates it. Because of what Jesus is about to do, His own death is now accelerated. The next passages will tell us they will seek Him all the more to kill Him, because of the resurrection of Lazarus. This has amazing implications but I don't know of any text that addresses a theology of death that is Gospel saturated better than this one. This text brings us to clarity and understanding so that we know how God in His Word tell us to look at moments like this. How does God instruct us? How is it that we can have a theology of death that is saturated with the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? The encounter with Mary, Martha and Lazarus opens this door. Walk through it with me. (10:09)

Let's anticipate the encounters Jesus has in the first seventeen verses of John 11. If you look back at John 10, because Jesus is under attack and there is a death warrant out for Him, He has left Jerusalem because it is not yet His time. He has taken a two day journey across the river Jordan to a place called Bethany. There were two Bethanys – there was Bethany beyond the Jordan and Bethany near Jerusalem. Both Bethanys come into play here. Jesus is at Bethany beyond the Jordan and from Bethany near Jerusalem which is the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus (not the Lazarus in Luke) a messenger is sent to Jesus. You can almost hear them breathlessly arrive from this two day journey. It is an important trip that they have made. They have come to let Jesus know that the one whom He loves, Lazarus is ill. It is startling news to everyone except one and that's Jesus. He is fully aware of it. So Lazarus' sisters have sent for Jesus to come. Obviously they are wanting Jesus to come and heal him.

Jesus makes an almost enigmatic statement that will be clarified for us. John 11:4 says [4] *But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* This illness is not designed to terminate at death. The purpose and destination of this illness is not death but in general to glorify God and specifically to point us to the preeminent glory of Jesus Christ. What happens after that?

John 11:5-6 says [5] *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. [6] So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.* Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus so He stayed right where He was. He didn't go and heal him. The Sovereign God of glory stayed right where He was. After the two days let's look now at what Jesus said.

John 11:7-10 says [7] *Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."* [8] *The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking 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 anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."* In other words, they are trying to remind Him there is a death warrant out there and the warrant is 'Jesus dead or alive'. Why would You want to go back there to get stoned again?

Jesus responds to them and what is He telling them by talking about the twelve hours in a day? He is telling them He is going back but He is not a criminal to be executed in the hands of the rulers and authorities. I am the Priest and I am the Lamb and I'll give My life when the time comes. The night for My soul has not arrived and I won't go back to be stoned because I've got work yet to be done and it's at Bethany and then in Jerusalem. That night will not fall until Calvary and the tomb but until then I've got work to do and they can't stop Me. It's day time so let's go.

John 11:11 says [11] *After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."* Here Jesus is going back to the Old Testament language of God's covenant people for when they would die they would refer to God's people as having slept with their fathers to awaken, looking at the death of a believer. Therefore a euphemism is used and not the stark word of death. So it's already been used in the Old Testament, Jesus uses it here and Paul will take it to an art form later when he talks about believers falling asleep. He is not talking about soul sleep but he is saying that a death of a believer is absolutely different than the death of anyone else. Jesus affirms that language here. Then He tells His disciples that He wants to go awaken him and they don't quite clue what He means.

John 11:12-15 says [12] *The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."* [13] *Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. [14] Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, [15] and **for your sake I am glad** that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."* When glory comes and the glory of the Son of God is seen your faith will be strengthened. He is glad He wasn't there because this sickness which was not unto death but unto God's glory and the preeminence of the Son of God and when that occurs your faith will be strengthened. Your faith is strengthened in the glory of God displayed.

John 11:16 says [16] *So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."* Old doubting Thomas says "let's go too."

Now here is the encounter with Lazarus. John 11:17-19 says [17] *Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. [18] Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, [19] and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.* It's very important to note when it said Lazarus had been in the tomb four days when Jesus had arrived. The Rabbis taught that when someone dies you don't really declare them dead until four days. Their theory

was that the spirit/soul of the person was hovering around them and could at any time re-enter into them. So Jesus, not because He is affirming what they are teaching, is making sure they won't call this a resuscitation when He brings Lazarus back from the dead but it will be a resurrection. So He distinctly and purposefully stays away two days then two days travel so that now Lazarus has now been in the tomb four days. That is affirmed at this point in the passage.

Later on Jesus will have them open the tomb and they'll say "Lord, we shouldn't do that because there will be an aroma." The Old King James version says "he stinketh." In other words, His encounter with Lazarus is a corpse in a tomb. Then comes another encounter and that's the encounter with Martha.

John 11:20-27 says [20] *So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. [21] 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 from 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 on the last day." [25] Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, (In other words, death is not a destination. It's a transition. Though he die, he is living. Yet shall he live, meaning he'll never die.) [26] and everyone who 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 coming into the world."*

So Jesus has an encounter with Martha in which she told the Lord that if He had been there her brother would not have died. Here she affirms that Jesus is a miracle worker. Everyone tries to read into Martha's comments her by saying she maybe accusing Jesus but I think she's just making a statement. Perhaps it's a confession in faith that He could heal him because later on she brings up the healing He did for the widow's son in Nain. Clearly we see what was on her mind when she says "if You had been here he would be living." By the way, now that You are here, You can still do something about this.

Jesus does not argue with that but redirects her. Your brother will rise again. Martha knows that all will rise in the resurrection for she believes in that. She knows there will be a resurrection in the last day. John 11:25-26 is Jesus' response to Martha, [25] *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, [26] and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."* When others explain this verse they say that Martha is talking about the resurrection in the last day and Jesus is trying to explain that He is going to do one now. That is not what He is doing. He is not correcting her about the resurrection on the last day to the one He is about to do. He is redirecting her to Himself.

The point is not the resurrection on the last day or the resurrection on this day of Lazarus but it is that Lazarus and she believes in Him and He is saying that He is the Resurrection and the Life. If you're in Me then you don't die, you live. Death is not a destination but it's a transition. He is directing Martha to Himself as He says 'do you believe in Me?' Then Martha confesses what Peter did at Caesarea by the Sea by saying "You're the Christ! You're the Son of the living God. I believe. You are my life. You are my Resurrection." So she immediately leaves and goes to her sister Mary who has remained in the house mourning.

John 11:28-31 says [28] *When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."* [29] *And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.* [30] *Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. (He is still outside of Bethany)* [31] *When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.* I have the wonderful privilege as a pastor to watch you, as a people of God, respond to others in times of challenge. You are an amazing people. Most of us have learned that when people are hurting it's not our gift of gab that is going to get them through but it's just being there with them. These people here with Mary are just there with her. In fact, when they open their mouth they will get in trouble. When you are faced with these times just go and hug the people, don't feel the need to have to say something. You can work on what to say that's Biblical but that's not the biggest point. Just be there. These people just showed up. That is a wonderful ministry.

So now what happens? John 11:32-33 says [32] *Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* [33] *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.* Mary does the same thing Martha does except there is a little bit of difference. When Mary comes she not only says the same thing Martha does but notice she is saying it while weeping. You can almost hear the sobs when the statement is coming out. As the people who are looking at her weeping, they start weeping. When He sees them all weeping it says He was deeply moved and greatly troubled.

It doesn't stop there. John 11:34-36 says [34] *And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."* [35] *Jesus wept.* [36] *So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"* [37] *But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"* Do you hear the echo of Mary and Martha but what the people said also? So here is the text that has been unfolded before us. What does this text say to us in one specific area?

Here is your takeaway. What does this text tell us about the love of Christ for His people and the death of His people? The love of Christ for His people is not evidenced by His postponement of death or that He would raise us temporarily only to die at another moment but by bringing them to glory. Now there are four things that as you walk through the text that are clearly by the Holy Spirit, under the burden of John that He wants to get clear to us.

The first one is that Jesus loves Mary, Martha and Lazarus. That pulsates throughout the entire text. Three times there is the declaration of 'the one whom You love is ill.' John says that Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus and so He stayed. It is very clear that Lazarus is called His friend. Lazarus is stated to be a believer. How did Lazarus believe in Jesus? It was because he loved Him, but you can't love Him unless He first loves you. The text wants to emphasize the intimacy that the Lord enjoys with this family and His love for them. John emphasizes this so much that when he explains who Mary and Martha are he introduces Mary as the one who anointed Him for His death with oil and wiped His feet with her hair. This event hasn't even happened yet in the timeline of this passage. The anointing doesn't happen until John 12. John goes to something yet to happen to try to make the point that there is an intense, intimate, loving

relationship that Jesus Christ enjoys with His people in general and very specifically in this text with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Even the people say “Look how much He loved them.” You see it in His emotions of weeping. You see it the affirmations of the text. It is abundantly clear John is letting you know that Jesus loves Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

A second thing that is clear in the text is they sent for Jesus when Lazarus was ill because they knew He could heal him. Mary and Martha had sent a message to Jesus for the specific purpose of healing their brother.

A third thing that is clear in the text in light of Christ lingering, the disciples, Mary, Martha and the people question, why didn't He come? At the request of Him to come, because Jesus loved them He didn't go. John made it crystal clear that because He loved them He stayed where He was. John 11:5-6 says *[5] Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. [6] So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

A fourth thing from the text that's clear is when He gets there Christ is fully engaged emotionally and rationally. When He comes to this place He weeps. It says He was deeply moved and greatly troubled. These are two very tough translations to make but I want to give you what I believe can help here after doing much study on this. By going to other places in the Bible you find these verbs and nouns. When it says He was deeply moved and greatly troubled it's the same language that is used to speak of Bethsaida where the waters had to be 'deeply moved', stirred up for someone to get in and be healed.

When Jesus sees the moment when Mary and Martha are weeping and all that is going on around them, the first thing we are told is that He is deeply moved. He is stirred up and then we're told He is greatly troubled which means irate. He is absolutely irate. The third thing we're told in His emotional engagement is that He weeps. I have researched all I could here and commentator after commentator tries to get these emotions together to find this silver bullet but I don't think you can. I think you see these multiple emotions because of the multi-dimensions of what is going on. Jesus is standing in front of our enemy – death and He is irate. He is standing at the tomb of one whom He loves and He is stirred up. He sees the consequences of death and its separation of men and women in their anguish and He weeps.

This is not the weeping of someone who is facing something beyond what He can handle. This is not someone who is overwhelmed. It's not the weeping of whining or the weeping of inability. This is a deep weeping of anguish and empathy mixed at the same time. With the emotional response He is facing the enemy, the one whom He has to come to grips with. Jesus fully knows just days from here there will be another death, another resurrection and Christ will enter into mortal combat with death and defeat it so that we might have life. So here He stands.

Some say He is frustrated with the questions. I don't think He's frustrated. There is the questioning of His motives – if You had been here, couldn't You have saved Him, we thought You loved him. That's just underneath the surface here. Why do you think Mary and Martha both said the same thing to Jesus? They have been talking about this for four days – why didn't Jesus come, we thought He loved us, where was He, if He had been here He would have healed Him, why didn't He answer our request, does He love us. The disciples are questioning it. Maybe He didn't go because of self preservation,

He might be killed. Martha questions just under the surface, we thought You loved him so why didn't You come?

The people left the ministry of presence (just being there) and began to speak. They said when they saw Jesus weep "Look how much He loved him. Why did He not come for He could have prevented his death?" But Jesus sovereignly stayed away. He had appointed the death for His glory. So I'd like to leave you with some closing thoughts and I've tried to word this as best I can.

The love of Christ for His people is not evidenced by His postponement of death or that He would raise us temporarily only to die at another moment but by bringing them to glory. Let's answer the questions these people are asking. When we pray and that loved one is not healed, let's answer this. Does He heal at times? Yes but the evidence of the love of Christ for His people is not revealed or measured by His postponement of our death and that's what it would be, a postponement. *It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment* (Hebrews 9:27 ESV).

It's not even a resurrection and I'll try to get more to this in the next study but I feel for Lazarus. Not only has he walked through the death, faced that unknown but he was brought back to die again. I don't read the books people have written who have died and come back. The only one I would read if he had written a book was Lazarus. I think the reason which is pure speculation on my part that he didn't write a book is he had to get over being ticked off. What am I doing back here? The love of Christ for His people is not evidenced by His postponement of death or that He would raise us temporarily only to die at another moment. The love of Christ is revealed because He meets death for us and He wins the victory over death for us.

He invites us to Himself and when you're in Him, you don't die but you live. He is the resurrection and the life. This crowning miracle has much to say about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the life of Lazarus. We'll get to that. It accelerates that moment. It helps us understand that moment but I want you to see Him at this tomb and the death of a believer is not the absence of Christ's affection or His attention but it's the evidence of the victory of His love and devotion. When you arrive there you have arrived at glory. The destination of Lazarus' illness is not death, its glory. When the believer dies it is glory. What he had in measure is unmeasured. What he had tasted is overflowing. He is with the One who loved him and loosed him from his sins. The death of a believer becomes the platform for glory. The death of a believer is not a destination or a termination but a transformation and it is an amplification. Watch the flag of Christ go high at the death of a believer.

When the world goes to despair the believer's life rises in praise to the Lord. When our loved ones go to be with the Lord and you go to be with the Lord that is not His absence. That is not His lack of attention or lack of love. It is the evidence of His love and His devotion. He has won the victory over death so even though you die you live. Absent from the body is present with the Lord and the Savior is with you. He goes with you through the valley of the shadow of death. This is why pastors must labor at this. These are the issues that must be dealt with from the Gospel and not just how do you make a Gospel directed decision about a job or how to raise children. All of those are important.

What about the matter of death? We don't have to retreat to clichés or sentimentality but we have something to declare. We are in Christ and when the believer

dies it is the resurrection and the life. Even though they are dead yet they live. They are in Christ. The point is that in Christ we live and when death comes it's merely transition. Its glorious transformation and it becomes a platform for amplification that the world may yet see. I understand we're very much like Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It took him four days to find out a little bit about this glory. Most of the time we'll await eternity to be seen but this is not a stoic. They died, they were a Christian, happy am I. No, we grieve. We are separated from them, for a time but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Our emotions are informed.

We have a Savior who went to death. See Him stirred up. See that war house stand on its hind legs ready to do battle. Hear the trumpet. He is looking to just days ahead. He will enter into mortal combat and win the victory over death. Death where is your victory? Grave where is your sting? Christ has won the victory and lives. I'm in Him therefore I'm alive in Christ. That's what I know at a moment like that. That's what fills my soul. That's what I have asked God to instruct my heart.

The last thing a believer wants is to come back from death. I believe the saints are concerned for those left but they are in glory. They want you to join them. They don't want to come back here. They want you to come there. Not with stoicism or denial of true emotions and I understand the pull to want them back. I have lost my dad and mom and not a day goes by that I don't miss them. I still think about my grandparents but I rejoice that they live in Him forever. Lord, let people see that in me that there is a risen Savior and may the flag of Christ at the death of His people rise.

That was the phrase God used to bring me into His Kingdom. I don't know the exact day I was converted. I was raised in a Christian family, had a Christian home and a Christian church. I went forward three different times. I think I was converted when I was 21 years old and it crystallized around this. I was dating Cindy. She was a Christian. I only dated Christians but I wasn't a Christian. Because she was a Christian it meant I had to go to church. I couldn't take her back to my church for that would blow my cover. I wasn't going to go to her church. She was Southern Baptist and I wasn't sure about them. So I found a Presbyterian Church. I figured they don't believe much. I didn't know there were different kinds of Presbyterian Churches.

The next thing I know is I get this phone call asking me and my wife to go to this elder's house whose wife had just died to stay with their kids. Jim was 40 and Imogene was 39 with four little girls. The girls had asked for us to come over because they had taken their mom to the hospital. She died of that cerebral hemorrhage. I remember saying to Jimmy "I don't know what to say to you. I'm kind of new at this church stuff but whatever I can do let me know." He looked at me and said "Harry I think there is something you need to hear from me." I said "What is that Mr. Elliot?" He said "If I could bring Imogene back right now I wouldn't do it." I didn't have a category for that so stupid me said to that was "Were you two having trouble?" He said "No, what she has now is so glorious, why would I bring her here? Harry, it won't be that long until I will be with her. I don't know what God has in this but I know this isn't an accident. God has a purpose so let's see what it is."

One purpose was me coming to the Kingdom. I went to the next room and said to Harold Jones "Mr. Jones is he on some kind of drugs." Harold said "Harry you came to church and you just heard about Jesus. The flag of Christ goes up. He has won the victory over death. That's what you are seeing." So I came into the Kingdom that day.

Fourteen years later as I am sharing that exact story in greater detail in a doublewide trailer because Briarwood had sent me to plant a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1983, a young girl is sitting in the back is listening but won't let me see her face. I kept trying but as soon as the service was over I made a beeline to that girl because I wanted to see who was trying to hide from me.

She said to me "You don't remember me do you?" I said "I think so." She said "Fourteen years ago what you were talking about in the service, I'm one of the girls. I told the Lord I couldn't understand why He took my mother but if you could ever show me one good thing that glorified You then I'll come to You. I heard it today." And she came. You don't know all of the glory that is woven into the tapestry of a believer.

This isn't to death. This isn't God's absence or lack of attention and affection. This is His love that led Him to the cross and won the victory over the tomb to bring you to glory and to give us a platform to tell the world. The grave had been defeated. You no longer have to be enslaved by the fear of death. We have a Victor who was stirred up, whom met the enemy and the victory was His, therefore the triumph is ours. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You the moments we could be together in Your Word. O God our God these are crucial issues for us. If You don't come Jesus then this is our day of glory we are talking about. Inform us from Your Word. We have loved ones. Inform us from Your Word. As I close in prayer there is one group I am deeply aware of. They are reading this today and today they have heard a sobering subject but a glorious declaration and proclamation of joy. Father, all will be resurrected but Your people to life, those who by faith say 'no' to judgment. Dear friend, Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life. He has won the victory. Do you believe? Jesus, minister to Your people. I pray that Your Word would saturate us with Gospel truth for life, death and glory, I pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.