

Today I want to tell you three (3) stories. Our first comes from the lips of Mary of Bethany. It was like this...one day my brother became ill. We sent word to a dear, dear friend of his illness. We didn't ask him to come, but just reminded him that one whom he loved was ill. We didn't think he would come, but just speak the words of healing and life and our brother would be made well. However by the time the messenger reached our friend our brother died. As is our custom and dictated by our climate, we buried my brother in the family tomb. But my sister and I comforted each other because we knew that even then our friend could raise our brother from death. We knew of the wonderful miracles that he had done by giving life back to a 12-year-old year girl and to a young man, our friend stopped the funeral procession and given him back to his dear mother. And remember that nobleman's boy who died and Jesus spoke the words and the boy was alive when his father returned home? No, we weren't worried!

The day after we temporarily laid Lazarus in the family tomb the messenger returned with our friend's words: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." This gave us hope and great joy. We knew our friend would soon arrive and would perform for us the same kind of miracle that he had done for others. My sister began to cook and clean, in preparation for the arrival of our friend and his disciples, but I just rehearsed in my mind the joy of having my brother back. Lazarus was the spiritual and financial stability of our house and home. Naturally this was totally unorthodox when we were expected to weep and move about the house quietly, but we knew what was promised and had great anticipation.

The next few days and nights we waited and talked about how awesome our friend was and how God had given him power to be the bread of life for people who were spiritually starving; the light of the world for people that were spiritually blind; the door for those who want to enter the Kingdom of God; the good shepherd for those of us who are a part of God's flock; and for us we were sure that he would be life and restoration!

We were fine until the morning of the fourth day; we thought we had waited in vain and we lost all hope! No one had been given their life back that had been dead for four days. By now the body had begun to decay and our only hope was to meet our brother again at the resurrection of the dead in the Last Days. That morning we invited the mourners to join us.

Our house was taken over by a crowd of sympathizing mourners. We knew the rules as we had observed them when our parents died. All our furniture was reversed, and we sat on the ground or on low stools. Our deep mourning would last for seven days. We began our weeping on that day. We no longer anoint ourselves, nor wore shoes, nor washed. Our week of deep mourning would be followed by thirty days of lighter mourning. It was a sacred duty for friends and neighbors to come to express loving sympathy with the sorrowing relations of one who had died. One of our Rabbis explained the text in Deuteronomy 13:4: "You shall walk after the Lord your God" as a command to us to imitate the things which God is depicted as doing in scripture. God clothed the naked (Genesis 3:21); God visited the sick (Genesis 18:1). God comforted the mourners (Genesis 25:11); God buried the dead (Deuteronomy 34:6). In all these things we must imitate the actions of God. So that's what we were doing when Jesus arrived in Bethany.

I saw my sister leave the house that afternoon and thought she went out the cry at the tomb or take care of some other business in preparation for our friend's arrival, even though it was already too late. She came back in quietly and told me that Jesus had finally arrived and wanted to talk with me. I left the house but others followed without asking. I knew they assumed that I was going to the tomb to mourn. When I saw him I knelt at his feet and said what was on my heart: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." As I began to cry and lament with my friends and neighbors, Jesus also began to quietly weep. I could hear the mourners commenting on the fact that he must be crying because he loved Lazarus so, but others were saying he wept because he could not stop Lazarus from dying.

I don't remember all who were present but Thomas was with him, and then my sister joined us. Jesus asked us where we had laid Lazarus and we all went to the tomb. We went weeping and mourning. But when we arrived Jesus made the strangest request; that the stone be rolled away.

My sister got upset; reminding Jesus that by not the process of decay had started and there would be a terrible smell! (She is always the practical one.) It was our Jewish belief that the spirit of the departed hovered around his tomb for four days, seeking an entrance again into his body. But after four days the spirit finally left for the face of the body was so decayed that it could no longer be recognized. But Jesus gently reminded her of the message He had sent, and He urged her and all of us to believe it. My sister relented, and the stone was rolled away.

Then Jesus paused to pray (John 11:41; also see 6:11) and thanked the Father that His prayer had already been heard. He prayed for the sake of the unbelieving spectators, that they might know that God had sent Him. Jesus called *Lazarus* and raised him from the dead. We, nor the most hostile spectator, could deny that a miracle had been done.

I can't explain what he did, but I know that we were without hope, and now we have great hope and joy. We were disturbed and afraid, but now we have peace.

Things I have learned from this experience:

- God's love for God's own is not a pampering love; it is a perfecting love. The fact that God loves us, and we love God is no guarantee that we will be sheltered from the problems and pains of life. We must never think that love and suffering are incompatible.
- It is not important that we followers of Jesus are comfortable, but it is important that we glorify God in all that we do.
- Jesus' message to us did not say that our brother would not die. It promised only that death would not be the ultimate result, for the ultimate result would be the glory of God.

- When we find ourselves confronted by disease, disappointment, delay, and even death, our only encouragement is the Word of God. We must live by faith and not by sight. Our situation seemed hopeless, yet we knew that Jesus was the Master of every situation.
- When we face our last enemy, death, we want the Savior. When we belong to Him, we have all that we will need in life, death, time, or eternity!
- It's easy to pray when we or a loved one first becomes sick. We believe firmly that Jesus does love us. I pray that my story helps you deal with those painful delays in answers to prayer that trouble you as people of faith.¹

The second story is told of a man had a notorious criminal record. He had murdered men, women and children in the most brutal way. Anyone who stood in his way was pitilessly eliminated. Now he was in prison awaiting death. While in prison he was visited by two Canadian women who tried to talk to him through the bars, but he only glowered at them like a caged and savage animal. In the end they abandoned the attempt; but they gave him a Bible, hoping that it might succeed where they had failed. He began to read it, and, having started, could not stop. He read on until he came to the story of the Crucifixion. He came to the words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," and these words broke him. "I stopped," he said. "I was stabbed to the heart, as if pierced by a five-inch nail. Shall I call it the love of Christ? Shall I call it his compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that I believed, and my hardness of heart was changed." Later, when the condemned man went to the scaffold, he was no longer the hardened, surly brute he once had been, but a smiling radiant man. The murderer had been born again; Christ had brought him to life.

It does not need to be as dramatic as that. A person can become so selfish that they are dead to the needs of others. A person can become so insensitive that they are dead to the feelings of others. A person can become so involved in the petty dishonesties and the petty

¹Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 688

disloyalties of life that they died to honor. A person can become so hopeless that they are filled with an inertia which is spiritual death. Jesus Christ can resurrect these persons. The witness of history is that Jesus has resurrected millions and millions of people like them and Jesus' touch has not lost its ancient power.

Jesus has brought into life the certainty that death is not the end. The last words of Edward the Confessor were: "Weep not, I shall not die; and as I leave the land of the dying I trust to see the blessings of the Lord in the land of the living." We call this world *the land of the living*; but it would in fact be more correct to call it *the land of the dying*. Through Jesus Christ we know that we are journeying, not to the sunset, but to the sunrise; we know, as Mary Webb put it, that death is a gate on the sky-line. In the most real sense we are not on our way to death, but on our way to life.

When we believe in Jesus, when we accept what he says about God and about life and stake everything on it, in truth we are resurrected for we are freed from the fear which is characteristic of the godless life; we are freed from the frustration which is characteristic of the sin-ridden life; we are freed from the futility of the Christ less life. Life is raised from sin's death and becomes so rich that it cannot die but must find in death only the transition to a higher life.

Our third story is from Robert McAfee Brown, an American professor, tells of something which this story did. He was an American army chaplain on a troopship in which 1,500 marines were returning from Japan to America for discharge. He was approached by a small group to do Bible study with them. He leapt at the opportunity. Near the end of the voyage, they were studying this chapter and afterwards a marine came to him. "Everything in that chapter," he said, "is pointing at me." He went on to say that he had been in hell for the last six months. He had gone straight into the marines from college. He had been sent out to Japan. He had been bored with life; and he had gone out and got into trouble—bad trouble. Nobody knew about it—except God. He felt guilty; he felt his life was ruined; he felt he could never face his family although they need never know; he felt he had killed himself and was a dead man. "And," said this young marine,

“after reading this chapter I have come alive again. I know that this resurrection Jesus was talking about is real here and now, for he has raised me from death to life.” That lad’s troubles were not finished; he had a hard road to go; but in his sin and his sense of guilt he had found Jesus as the resurrection and the life.²

The experience of Lazarus is a good illustration of what happens when one trusts the Savior (Eph. 2:1–10). Lazarus was dead, and all sinners are dead. He was decayed, because death and decay go together. All lost people are spiritually dead, but some are more “decayed” than others. No one can be “more dead” than another. Lazarus was raised from the dead by the power of God, and all who trust Jesus have been given new life and lifted out of the graveyard of sin (see John 5:24). Lazarus was set free from the grave clothes (see Col. 3:1ff) and given new liberty.³

This event is a marvelous picture of God’s Son bringing life to people. Many who are dead in sins and trespasses believe and come to life by the power of God (Eph. 2:1-10).⁴ Jesus invites each of us to come to him in faith and receive God’s gift of life.

² Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of John : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 79

³Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Jn 11:1

⁴Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:313