

Mary, Martha and Lazarus

Part 1

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[00:00:01] I want to speak to you a little tonight from this portion we have read in the 11th chapter of John's Gospel.

I had intended to speak to you on a very different subject, but perhaps in some strange way the Lord has varied that and intends this message.

So I have turned to John's Gospel chapter 11.

The Gospel of John is the one that gives us the deepest truth concerning our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is, as you know so well, displayed to us there as the Son of God, come from the very bosom of the Father into this world, God manifest in flesh.

[00:01:10] And here in the world, in John's Gospel, we have him passing in and out among men, speaking and acting in various ways.

And in John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit, through John the Apostle, selects some of the very many things that happened in the life of his blessed Master to give us, to set forth truth by way of witness, that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we might have life through his name.

[00:02:01] So that if we intelligently read John's Gospel and take account of the signs which are given us there and selected by the Holy Spirit, and listen to the signs, too, in the words that he spoke, for there are signs not only in the way of works, but there are signs in the way of words, then if we accept those and commit ourselves to that belief, we have life through his name.

These things are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name.

Now this eleventh chapter gives us the last of the eight great signs in the realm of works.

[00:03:08] And in it there is the sixth of the great signs in the region of words.

The sign, of course, in the realm of works is the raising of Lazarus. The great sign in the realm of

words is that tremendous assertion that our Lord Jesus makes, and only he could make it, I am the resurrection and the life.

I haven't time tonight to go through the various signs that the Holy Spirit has selected in John's Gospel.

I have done that in a way in this hall before, but I want to refer to the last of these signs [00:04:03] here in this eleventh chapter, because I believe it to be one of the most important. May I say this, though, in passing, that there is one sign above all others, in addition to those that I have spoken of already, one sign which we have in John's Gospel, which is the greatest sign of all.

You know how in the early days of the ministry we have dealt with in John's Gospel, our Lord said to the Jews that were around him, destroy this temple, and in three days I will build it again.

And he spake, as we know, of the temple of his body. And the great sign that confirms and finishes, as it were, the whole wonderful story is the great sign of his death, when they destroyed that beautiful temple. [00:05:06] And in three days it was raised again. He was raised from the dead, and he ascended on high, and so John gives us his message.

Now while these signs are given in, shall I say, a kind of intellectual way, so as to confirm our thoughts, and our powers of reasoning, to confirm them in the direction that John wants us to go, to travel.

He wants us to accept the fact of the deity, humanity, the truth of our Lord Jesus, as the Son of God, yet these things that we read of in John's Gospel are also intended [00:06:07] to appeal to our hearts.

And in the eleventh chapter of John's Gospel, we have a story there which appeals to our hearts.

You see, sometime or other, in the lives of all God's children, we pass through sorrow and trial.

And very often, the suffering child of God, in the midst of his trial and sorrow, he turns back to the Word of God, and he turns to John's Gospel, chapter 11.

You see, there are many things in life that are quite beyond our understanding.

[00:07:01] When you pass through trial, the great question that arises in your heart is, that word, why?

And the enemy of our souls is not behind hand, let me assure you, in coming to us and putting it into our minds, the great word why.

Why is this happening? Why is this allowed to happen?

And when you're passing through trial, the people around you will say sometimes, and I'm speaking now, of course, to fellow believers, they will say, well why should this happen? Why should it happen to him or to her?

Why not to somebody else whose life is disreputable and unworthy of God?

Why to him or to her?

And so the great question why comes into our minds.

[00:08:05] And my friends, the only way to deal with that great question is to turn back to the Word of God, and to realize that the Son of God, here in this world, acted in this way, in this chapter, with those who, like ourselves, were men and women of flesh and blood, with hearts and sensibilities, just as we have them. And as we read again the wonderful story, we are assured of his love and the wisdom of his ways.

And so I have read to you again tonight this chapter in John, or rather we have had it read to us.

Now the circumstances, and I'm not going to give you, believe me, anything that is very profound tonight.

[00:09:01] You know it all already, I feel sure, but there are sometimes when we can meditate again together upon these precious portions of the Word of God, and perhaps we may go away with profit to our souls.

And so I return to the simple story of Christ's dealings with Mary and Martha and Lazarus in this chapter. First of all, a word or two about the household, the home at Bethany.

It was a place where Jesus loved to go. Here is the Son of God, here in this world, come from the bosom of his Father into a world, such as you know and I know today, a world of misunderstanding and of sorrow, a world [00:10:06] where it's very easy to become tired.

Now here was a place, one above all places, I'm sure, where our Lord Jesus loved to go because he was welcome. The home of Bethany, Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

Here in this portion, Mary is put first, and then Martha and Lazarus, a home where Jesus loved to go. Well my friends, is that a sample of the home like yours?

Is your home like that tonight? Is it a place where Jesus loves to go? It will be if your hearts are set upon him.

You may say, well, the place where Jesus goes will surely be a perfect home. [00:11:05] Those who are there will be perfect people. It must be so surely, nay my friends, it's by no means so. In the characters of these three, the two sisters and the brother, there was a difference in character. We are made differently and he who made us, he knows about the work of his hands. He remembereth that we are dust, like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.

For he knoweth our frame, he remembereth that we are dust. And our Lord went to this home, although they differed in character. In the case of Mary, there was a soul, one of those genuine, sincere souls who have progressed deeply in the spiritual life, and who have learnt much, and to whom the person of the [00:12:08] Lord is very dear indeed, Mary who sat at his feet.

John reminds us in this portion of what occurred after this. John reminds us that this one, Mary, was the one who anointed him with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair.

She had learnt so deeply of him that he was everything to her, and in the only way she could possibly do it, before he went to his death, burial, she paid her homage and her worship to him.

And then there was Martha too. I never wish to criticise Martha.

She was a busy soul who saw to the comforts of that home, and there must be someone to [00:13:01] do that.

Our homes would be very different, wouldn't they, with no one to see to the ordinary comforts of life.

I know, as a man, if I have to look after myself for a short period, I don't like it. I can't do it and things go wrong, and there it is, where there's a womanly hand such as Martha's to look after the affairs of the home, it's a very great blessing indeed. And I'm sure that our Lord appreciated it.

And then there was Lazarus. We don't read very much about him, but in the Lord's own purposes, in God's own purposes, Lazarus was destined to play a very big part. For you see, as a result of what happened in this story, in this chapter, the Jews were taking counsel to put him to death.

They would put him to death as much as they would put to death his master, because Lazarus [00:14:02] was such a testimony.

And it was because of what happened to him in God's dealings.

Now I want just to point out here that there's one word, I think, and you must regard this please as just a meditation tonight, with no special order about it. There's one word which characterizes this chapter rather than another word. Perhaps you will see what I mean when I come to it. It's the word purpose, rather than the word power. Oh, you say, I know power is in the chapter. Ah yes, yes, yes.

But then you see, think what Jesus could have done, which he didn't do.

Now I refer a moment to another scripture, a very wonderful thing to me in the New Testament In the, I think it's the second epistle to Timothy, Paul writes this, [00:15:07] Trophimus, have I left at Miletum sick?

Oh, but you say, didn't Paul have power to heal the sick?

Did he not go to the house of the governor of Malta, when he was shipwrecked on the island, did he not heal him, cure him of the serious illness to which he was subject?

Why didn't he do it with Trophimus? Well, beloved friends, the apostle had wisdom, consummate wisdom, as well as power from God. And God's ways are not characterized always by power, but by purpose. I know that's rather a crude way of putting it, but I think you'll see what I mean in this chapter. [00:16:01] You see, God has his own purposes with his children.

You cannot tell, and I cannot tell very often, what his purposes are. And we cannot answer the great question, why do these things happen? But God has his own ways with us, and God has his own purposes.

In this chapter we get an example of it. Our Lord says, this sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God. I shall come to that in a minute, and explain, if I can, a little more to you about that. But what was the purpose then? The glory of God.

And in what happens to you and to me, dear friends, in life, life as we have to experience it here, is in some way that you cannot tell, and I cannot tell always, it is for the glory of God. You see, this life is not the end, is it?

[00:17:04] It's only the beginning. This life is but passing. It is but a, can I say, a kind of introduction to that which is eternal. And in that wonderful eternal day, and when we gather around our Lord Jesus Christ in heavenly glory, the glory of God will be complete.

And the believer rejoices in hope of the glory of God.

That's why he glories in tribulations, knowing that tribulation worketh patience, and patience experience, and experience hope.

And hope maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts. And so we go on our journey here, knowing that this life is not all, but that beyond it is that life to which we are going, which is blessing indeed to our souls.

[00:18:02] Now I believe that the dealings of God with our souls here in this life are for his glory.

Now coming to this chapter a little more, there's the sickness of Lazarus.

A certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. And the sisters, they send a message to Jesus, do see what a delightful message it was. They just say this, Lord behold he whom thou lovest is sick. There's no request there at all. They didn't ask Jesus to heal him. You see they knew the heart of our Lord Jesus, and they counted upon him. They counted upon his interest, and they just told him the facts of the case. Lord behold he whom thou lovest is sick.

[00:19:06] Now the strange thing is that when Jesus heard that, he said this sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby. Again I say, the man of the world, not understanding anything of the ways of God, may say, well why should this happen to a house like this? So the two sisters and the brother, apparently loving each other, and a place where Jesus loved to go, why should it happen here? But it did happen.

Our Lord says this sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God. But then Lazarus was dead.

Have you thought about that?

Lazarus was dead when that message got to our Lord Jesus.

Four days he'd been dead when Jesus came to him. One day it took for a messenger to come, another day for our Lord to go back, and Jesus waited [00:20:07] two days.

What did then our Lord mean, this sickness is not unto death? Well I believe he meant this.

This isn't the end of it.

This sickness is not unto death.

For the believer there is no death. I would remind you of a little couplet that is on my father's grave, and it runs like this, thanks be to God there is no death for those who trust his word. Thanks be to God for victory through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I believe that's what our Lord Jesus Christ meant here. He didn't mean that he hadn't passed away. He didn't even mean that he was to bring him back from the dead. Our Lord Jesus was referring much more deeply to the fact that for the believer, for the [00:21:06] one who loves him, sickness is not unto death.

But what he does say is it's for the glory of God that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.

Now it says in verse 5, and John tells us this, John the writer of the gospel, he says now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. We'll mark this about that.

It comes just before we read a remarkable thing that Jesus stayed two days in the same place.

Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Now I'm told that the word that John the apostle used when he wrote about this means that our Lord was devoted to those two sisters and Lazarus. [00:22:03] Quite a different word than the word in verse 3 where they said to him, Lord he whom thou lovest is sick.

That means, that word means, well Lord the one to whom you're attached is sick. This word in verse 5 that John uses is a much deeper word. It means a love that is intelligent, that takes account, that thinks, and so on. It's not mere emotion but it means that which is intelligent and a deep word. And John tells us that Jesus was devoted to these two sisters and Lazarus.

When he had heard therefore that he was sick he abode two days in the same place where he was.

Oh dear friends, what a remarkable thing wasn't it? Again I say our Lord could have acted, he could have dealt differently here but he didn't [00:23:07] choose to do it.

Because in his own mind as God, the son of God, there was purpose just as there is purpose in his ways with all of us.

And then he says to his disciples, let us go into Judea again. Well now there is a remarkable thing, the disciples say to him, Lord but you know what's happened in Judea.

What are you going to do? Are you going to run the risk of being arrested and killed there? Our Lord quietly and calmly says, there are twelve hours in the day, if a man walks in the day he doesn't stumble, the night comes when no man walks. The meaning of that is just this, that his hour had not yet come. If you look earlier in the gospel you will find three or four different references where [00:24:02] our Lord says my hour is not yet come.

And they couldn't do anything to him because his hour was not yet come. Our Lord passes on in the

calm, quiet dignity of one who knows his pathway, who has a work to accomplish but there did come a day when he said the hour is come, that the son of man must be glorified.

And as Luke puts it, he said to his accusers, those who had arrested him, he said this is your hour and the power of darkness.

There came an hour when he went to the cross of Calvary, oh it was no chance that happened to him.

It was no accident that occurred to our Lord. That was the calm, deliberate working out of the purposes of God. [00:25:02] But not so here.

Well then he takes his journey and he comes to Bethany.

It was nigh to Jerusalem about fifteen furlongs and when they come, Martha meets him.

Martha says to Jesus, Lord if thou had been here my brother had not died. Now she said just the same thing as Mary did a little later on, just the same words. And I don't want to speak too certainly about this. You must all make up your own minds about it. But personally I feel that when Martha spoke these words to him, there was just that sense in her mind of reproach, not a violent reproach, how could she do such a thing as that?

[00:26:03] But the kind of thing dear friends that comes into your heart and mine when trial comes upon us.

And she hadn't learned as deeply in the things of God as her sister had. And so she says, Lord if thou had been here my brother hadn't died. There was reproach in the words.

But then she adds, and Martha is perfectly honest, that's one of the beautiful things about her character, she was completely honest. She didn't speak and act in a way beyond her faith as it were.

And she says, I know that even now whatsoever thou would ask of God, God will give it thee. And then Jesus says to her, thy brother shall rise again. There wasn't much comfort to Martha.

She didn't realize, she didn't appreciate what our Lord really meant. [00:27:03] All she could think of was a dim, vague, distant day when the just should rise because the Jews knew the truth of resurrection.

They looked to go to Abraham's bosom and that was what Martha thought our Lord meant that day. And then our Lord Jesus Christ gives expression to this wonderful statement which I have said was one of the signs in the region of words. He says, I am the resurrection and the life.

Now my friends, no one but the Son of God could say those words. No one would dare to say such a thing excepting he who is God over all. We have read often of how he was the one through whom all things were created. Look to the far-flung heavens if you will, take your telescope and see, or again take [00:28:03] a microscope and look to the smallest things that you can see through that microscope. And he created them all. I am the resurrection and the life.

And to those who believe in him he imparts that life for he is able to do it. He that believeth in me though he were dead yet shall he live. And he that believeth, whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

And I will pass on to the time when Mary came to him.

She also comes to Jesus, called by her sister. And when she comes and she sees him, she fell at his feet.

Oh my friends, I feel sure that the ways of God with us are intended to give us a deeper [00:29:01] sense of the glory of the person whom we have come to know. And as we grow in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus, I am not now speaking of the wonderful blessing it is to us, but the effect is to give us in our own hearts and souls that sense of reverence for him more and more. And she fell at his feet. And what she had to say to him, she said at his feet. It's the place, you know, that becomes every one of us, the place of worship. Oh I know it's so easy to be occupied in our service for Christ. We are busy here and there doing this and that and the other for him. And it is in a way an expression of our affection. We mustn't lose sight of that. What Martha did was an expression of her affection for Christ. But my friends, what he values most of all is the worshipping heart, the adoring heart [00:30:02] that would fall in spirit at his feet and give him what is his due.

And now I come on to the most touching part of the story.

Our Lord Jesus comes and he listens to the words of Mary, but he doesn't reply like he did to Martha.

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled. The words used of that weeping in that verse are the words for wailing. That is that loud lamentation which was the custom in the East and which set forth their sorrow. Genuinely I'm quite sure in the case of Mary and Martha and their friends, not so genuinely [00:31:01] of course with the hired mourners which were brought in at other times. But when Jesus therefore saw her weeping and the Jews also weeping, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled.

What does that mean do you think? Now they tell us that the ingredient in that word groaning is a very strong one. It was almost that he became angry. How can I communicate it to you? He became angry and troubled himself.

Wasn't that he was just troubled with what he saw, but it's a strong word that he troubled himself.

Why? Oh my friends it was because the sensitive spirit of the Son of God there, he saw the effects of sin in this world.

You and I get accustomed to it.

We become inured to this kind of thing and we lose that sensitivity that was with our Lord all the time.

[00:32:02] And so our Lord groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And then he said, where have you laid him? They said to him, Lord come and see. And then in just that small verse of two words you

get what is so wonderful and remarkable that Jesus wept.

It was not the word that he has used of him, you know, when he came in procession with the pilgrims that went to the feast and when he saw the city of Jerusalem as he came to the brow of it, there the word means loud weeping.

It was as though he was overcome and the sobs were heard by all.

This means quiet weeping. Jesus wept.

Why did he weep? He held the power of life in his hands. He went into that place knowing that he had power to raise Lazarus from the dead. [00:33:04] Why then did he weep?

You and I couldn't possibly, knowing circumstances like this, we couldn't weep like that, but Jesus did. Why did he do it? Oh my friends, it was the intense sympathy that he had for the sorrowing of those two sisters whom he loved. It was the outgoing from the Savior's blessed heart of sympathy for those he loved and whom he knew loved him. I think it's wonderful. I think it's wonderful to see the Son of God here in the world, the one who made all things, the one who at that very moment was sustaining the far-flung universe in its passage, that he should weep at the sorrow of these sisters.

Then said the Jews, behold how he loved him. Well I think they missed the point there. I think they thought it was just affection for Lazarus which led him to do that. [00:34:04] Beloved friends, it was affection for those sisters and it was the sensitive outgoing of his sympathy for them, although he knew that he could and was about to raise Lazarus from the dead.

Well then, to go just on to the end of the story now, for our time is going, Jesus comes to the cave and a stone lay upon it and he says, take ye away the stone.

Now here is just a little word in regard to our service for the Lord.

He told others to take that stone away in order that he might bring that dead man to life again. Do you do that?

Are you able to roll away the stone?

I know that no voice but that of Jesus can raise dead souls to life again today. [00:35:06] None but the voice of Jesus can bring life to dead sinners. But dear friends, he asks you, he asks me, to roll away the stone. Do you do it?

Do we do it as much as we might do, or I feel hesitant to say much about it because I know my own limitation in this very way, but it's a wonderful thing to roll away the stone so that Jesus may speak the word and that a dead soul may be brought to life again. And the stone was rolled away and Jesus prays.

And after he had prayed, he says this, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus come forth.

It's been often said, you know, the Lord Jesus didn't speak with a loud voice so that Lazarus might hear.

That may seem to be quite a simple and perhaps a foolish thought, but it wasn't for that [00:36:05] reason.

Oh no, the voice of the Lord penetrates to the very deepest recesses of the heart. Our Lord spoke in a loud voice because of those that were around. He would call forth Lazarus from the grave and all should know, all should hear. May I remind you again, this was a sign. One of the signs which the Holy Spirit has selected, given to those Jews, given to you, given to me, in order that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that we might, believing, have life through his name. And so he called.

One day he will call again.

He will call from the heavens for the Lord himself shall descend with a shout. Now what do you think about that? It is not that we might be able to hear, for the still small voice of the Lord God penetrated [00:37:06] far more than the earthquake and the fire and the wind. It was that which caused the prophet to wrap his mantle about his face, that still small voice.

No dear friends, when the Lord descends from heaven with a shout, it will be a shout of joy, his own joy, his own welcome receiving us to himself and with the angel and the trump of God.

And so he called with this loud voice and he that was dead came forth bound hand and foot with grave clothes. You may have wondered how it was that Lazarus could come forth bound with grave clothes. Well, in passing, may I just suggest to you that he was bound in this way in the Egyptian fashion where the limbs were, I'm told, bound separately. Not in the Hebrew fashion practiced so often among the Jews in other times where the limbs [00:38:06] were swathed in the ceremonies all together.

And so Lazarus comes forth.

He that was dead came forth bound hand and foot with grave clothes and his face bound about with a napkin.

How different to the resurrection of our Lord, wasn't it? When he rose from the dead, those clothes were just left there and the napkin that was about his head, not lying with the others in a place by itself, there they were just as they had dropped.

Our Lord rises from the dead.

And now Jesus says to them, loose him and let him go. Again I ask you to listen to this.

Our Lord didn't loose him.

He said to the others there, loose him and let him go. [00:39:02] Here was a dead soul raised to life again. They rolled away the stone. Our Lord's voice, the only voice that can ever bring life to dead souls, had spoken and Lazarus came forth.

But there were the grave clothes around his limbs. He wasn't in a fit condition, was he, to walk about and to go back to his home and to meet people and so on. No, the grave clothes must be removed.

And my friends, our Lord Jesus commits to you and to me always that service when souls are born again. When we are first converted, there's often very much, you know, that is of the grave, that is of the death about us still.

Sometimes it takes a long time for those grave clothes to be thoroughly removed. But they must be removed, otherwise we shall not walk and live as Christians in the way our Lord intends us to do. [00:40:01] And so the ministry of the Lord's people to each other comes in. And it's for us to remove those grave clothes. Not only roll the stone away, but when the soul is brought to life again from being dead in trespasses and sins, then to remove those grave clothes. And how do we do it? Well, we only do it through the ministry of the Word of God. We only do it through the patient, quiet interest in one another that our Lord expects of us. And we follow his ways. We follow his words, and the way he acted and thought in his life here. And so we help one another to live better, to live more nearly as we should do, as those who are alive from the dead.

Well, I leave this portion with you tonight. I've confessed to you it has been perhaps somewhat disjointed for times when it is difficult [00:41:02] to think as one would like to do, but perhaps something in this story may be a blessing to some soul here.

I don't know you all, and if I did, I couldn't possibly fathom the secrets of your hearts. I don't know them, and you don't know mine. But there is one thing that the Word of God always does. It always directs us to Christ. What I want to do in leaving this portion with you tonight is just to convey this to you, that our Lord Jesus and his love are ever the same. You may not understand his ways with you. Very often we cannot.

We seem to be walking through the darkness, but he loves us still. And this portion in John's Gospel, chapter 11, tells us that in every line of it. Jesus loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

[00:42:01] And even though it may be difficult, his ways are best, aren't they? In closing, I just want to read to you perhaps two verses that I copied out several weeks ago, which seem to me to bear upon this great subject.

We pray, don't we, sometimes for what we feel we need and what we feel we ought to have. And to us it seems so simple that the Lord should give us what we ask and everything will be well.

And then we find it doesn't just work out that way. Well, I'll read these lines to you as I close.

I wanted joy, but thou didst know for me that sorrow was the gift I needed most.

And in its mystic depth I learnt to see the Holy Ghost. I wanted health, but thou didst bid me sound the secret treasures of pain. And in the moans and groans my heart oft found the Christ again.

[00:43:06] I wanted wealth, t'was not the better part. There is a wealth with poverty oft given. And thou didst teach me of the gold of heart, best gift of heaven. I thank thee, Lord, for those unanswered prayers, and for thy word, the quiet kindly nay. T'was thy withholding lightened all my cares that blessed day.