

Two Loyal Sisters

John 11:17-27

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*The Lord's Day Evening
August 16, 2009*

We have spent these long, hot summer months in the gospels looking at many individuals with a variety of different backgrounds, each unified by the fact that they have had an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. We continue our series tonight by looking at one of the more famous, well-known stories in the gospels from John chapter 11. We look tonight at the death and the resurrection of Lazarus. Now you'll see in your bulletin that our focus tonight is on verses 17 to 27. I would like, for the sake of building some context, to read the first four verses of John chapter 11, and then skip down to verse 17 and read all the way to verse 27. This will be the focus of our time together tonight. Before we read God's Word, before we spend time in reflection and explanation and exposition of His Word, let's ask for His help and blessing in prayer. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, it is a unique and distinct privilege to gather on the Lord's day evening with Your saints, the people of God, in order to hear from You, from Your Word, to have You speak to us by Your Word. We ask, O Father, that You would be pleased to send Your Spirit to us, to illumine our hearts and our minds, to open up the beauties and wonders of Your Word to speak to us the truth, and in that truth, sanctify us. Make us fit for heaven. Make us men and women and boys and girls who would serve You, be equipped to fight the good fight of faith, to run the race, to press towards that upward calling of the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, we pray most of all this night, that as You speak to us from Your Word You would be glorified, that You would be honored. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

John chapter 11 verse 1 — this is God's Word:

“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to Him, saying, ‘Lord, he whom You love is ill.’ 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.’”

Now verse 17:

Now when Jesus came, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met Him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give You. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha said to Him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believe in Me shall never die. Do you believe this? She said to Him, Yes, Lord; I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and infallible Word.

I was catching up on a little reading last week — some of my magazine subscriptions. I read through *Harper's* magazine. Some of you might receive it. It's a wonderful, wonderful work. I read an article by a man named Mark Slouka. The title of the article was on "The Sin of Meddling." It's a fascinating article in and of itself, but there was one section that reminded me a bit of this passage. It was a story that he recounted about his daughter who had found a baby cottontail who had lost its way, who had no home, from all evidence had no mother, and was injured and probably half starving. He, being the good father that he was, gathered a carton to go and pick up this baby cottontail that they had found in the field. He carried it back home and before they had even crossed the threshold, this baby cottontail had won the heart of his daughter. She had decided to go ahead and name him. His name was Winston. She spent the good part of the next day with a little eye dropper full of warm milk making sure he was getting all the nourishment that he needed. She gave him all of the tender loving care that she knew to give and treated him with more respect than probably any cottontail had received before. But despite all of her efforts, Winston died. Her relationship to Winston was no more than about three days. They decided that they would bury Winston in a clearing behind their house next to the second oak — right there alongside the chipmunk that she had also tried to nurse back to health, and the cowbird, and many other sorts of animals that she loved to take care of. Mark wanted to give his daughter a word of encouragement but he didn't know exactly what to say. This is how he recounts it in the article: He said,

"I wanted to say something for all three of us, but what was there to say? Science couldn't help me here. It spoke a very different kind of language — a language that was washed clean of sentiment and of pain. Christ couldn't help me either. I could have said something, I suppose, about God's plan, but I really had no idea what God's plan was in taking Winston. And so fighting the absurd tightening in my throat, I said to her, 'I do not know why Winston has died, but I'm very sorry

that he did. We can't always understand why things like this happen.”

Now, I dare say most of us have had a moment similar to Mark and his daughter where we have cared for an animal, we have cared for someone we love, and we can't make heads or tails about what God is up to in taking them or in their prolonged suffering. The passage that is before us tonight seeks to shed some light on the “why.” It seeks to give us a rationale, a reason, a window into the heart and the designs of God so that we might be able to say later that Christ, well He does have something to say about Winston — and about all of us who suffer.

The story of Lazarus is a story well-known to all of us and we could look at it in a multitude of different ways, but I want to look at it along three lines of thought tonight. I want to look first at the condition, the condition of human nature. And then I want to look at the cure, the cure for what's wrong with human nature. And then I want to close with an issue of a call.

First, the condition of our human nature. If you look at John chapter 11, look right at verse 1, you see the passage, you don't have to go far to realize that something is wrong. Verse 1 — “Now a certain man was ill.” A certain man was ill. Sickness and physical ailment and suffering is something that all of us face. When we realize that our physical bodies are not working the way that they ought to, we immediately realize there is something wrong with the world. It gathers our attention. It's something we cannot shy away from. It is, as Lewis would refer to, “a pain is like God's megaphone to arouse a deaf world.” It arouses us, doesn't it?

I remember my dad recounting the first time he realized his body was not working up to its proper measure. He was in his late thirties. He was a runner - a runner in college, a runner in high school, a runner up until the early part of his adulthood. One day as he was running around the track at R. H. Watkins High School in Laurel, Mississippi, there was a young man much younger than he that saddled up right next to him as they were running. He pulled in and said, “You know, you're a pretty good runner for an old man.” Now as you can imagine, this was not the thing to say to my dad. A runner in high school and in college — yes he was in his thirties now, but a runner none the less. Well, he sped on ahead and my dad caught up to him and they looked at one another and both of them knew it was on. (laughter) They took off around the track, my dad made it about three-quarters of the way around, all out, until he pulled a hamstring. He was in pain like he had never been before and he realized he wasn't what he used to be.

As we grow old, we realize that our bodies are not going to hold up. The pain begins to become more frequent. We wind up injuring ourselves sleeping — I don't know how we do that. (laughter) And we find out that it takes us longer and longer and longer to get over the injuries. I remember when this came home to me. I was 19 years of age, had a good friend who was just diagnosed with cancer — he was my age. He was even thinking about ministry like me. He had

actually already found the love of his life, like me, and he was dying. And as far as I knew, I was not. I listened to the reports. I followed all of the experimental treatments. I was there for the good news. I was there for the bad news. I was there for the last news. I realized that I couldn't make sense of why my friend was going to pass away at such a young age — so much future ahead. What was God up to?

In the passage before us, Martha had a plan. Her plan was to let Jesus know that the one whom He loved was ill. I suspect she believed that He would drop everything and come immediately to the side of Lazarus and heal him the way He had done so many others before. Martha had been there when Jesus had healed the blind man from birth. She had seen Jesus heal the lame man in the Pool of Bethesda. She was even aware, just a few chapters earlier, of the official's son who had a disease, probably something akin to what Lazarus was facing, who was slipping away into death, and yet Jesus had rescued him. She waited. She waited. And Lazarus died. Jesus never came. Now what's remarkable about seeing this is that it causes great confusion — what is Jesus up to? It was one that He loved and yet He wasn't there. He didn't take away the sting. He didn't remove the pain. He didn't heal His brother, His friend.

In verse 4 of John chapter 11 we read the most interesting thing: This illness, Jesus says, does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Martha thought that she had the plan in place — Jesus would come, save the day as He has done so many times before, but Jesus, Jesus marched by different priorities. He lived according to the glory of God and He knew that for God to receive the glory due His name would require the passing of His friend, not the saving of it. In John 11 verse 4 we learn that our suffering, our illnesses, our aches and pains, and yes even the death that will indeed overcome us all should the Lord tarry, will be for the Lord's glory, for God's glory, that His name would be praised. And what this means is that your suffering and the suffering of your loved ones — even the suffering of the Winston's in your life — really has very little to do with you. You see when Martha was thinking about Lazarus, she was thinking about a brother that she wanted to save. But when Jesus was thinking about Lazarus, He was thinking about God the Father, the Creator of the universe, who deserved all the glory, and that meant there was going to be a different plan because Martha believed that the major problem with Lazarus was a physical disease, but Jesus knew that the major problem with Lazarus was a more sinister disease. It was a deeper and more fundamental disease. It was the disease of sin.

You know, every time you feel that ache and every time you feel that pain, it's a reminder of the fact that you live in a broken and fallen world and that you inhabit a broken and fallen body. It's not just getting old, it's the evidence of decay, and decay happens when death is already ruling and reigning. You see, when Jesus comes, He says to Martha, "Martha, I know you thought you had the plan. I know that you thought I was here to simply touch every disease and heal everything,

but do you know that should I heal Lazarus of his physical disease, he's going to die anyway? He has another five years, another ten — he's going to pass away anyway. It's inevitable. I've come not simply to touch the disease, I've come to touch the disease underneath all other diseases. I've come to lay the ax at the root of all decay. I've come to see sin and death destroyed.”

When we feel the suffering and the pain in our own lives, we realize God is after the rerouting, the overcoming, the undoing of all of the decay and suffering of this life and He does it by taking on that decay and suffering Himself. When we suffer, our suffering is not primarily about us, it's primarily about Him. And what this means is that when you sense there is something wrong in your body, what you really sense is that there's something wrong in this world. There's something wrong in the soul. There's something more fundamental than genes and DNA and medical science. There's something as fundamental as sin and the spiritual world and there is nothing of which sin has not touched and will not destroy — unless of course someone would take it. This is the condition of our human nature.

You may be young here tonight and you don't sense it. You may think you are 10 feet tall and bullet proof — you're not, and should the Lord reign and tarry longer, you would find out just how feeble of the flesh that you really are and should ask the question: How do we get out of this? How do we get out of this? When we look at this passage, Jesus, and He sees Martha, His coming to her four days after Lazarus is already in the tomb — we are told in verse 6 that He heard the news of Lazarus and He stayed a couple of extra days where He was. Why? Because He's thinking about God's glory. Martha says, “Jesus, where were You? Where were You? If You had been here, my brother would not have died. But Jesus, I know, whatever You ask, God will give it to You.” I love the way Martha approaches Jesus. It's full of faith. She's waiting for Him to do something amazing because she's seen Him do it before. She's anticipating that we are about to see a breakthrough. But Jesus doesn't answer her request right away.

Most of the time in our suffering, we're much like Martha — she asks Jesus for a lot. She has all kinds of little assignments for Him, all kinds of little requests. “Jesus, I want You to come and heal Lazarus, and if You don't come, that's the reason he died, but still You could do something.” That's in essence the way she approaches Jesus — petitions. She wants something from Him. But notice what Jesus does. He says, “Martha, the pain is too great, the suffering it too real, it's too universal, it's too comprehensive. It's not just that I come to do something. Martha, I want you to look Me in the eyes and I want you to see that I am something. I have not come to be the cosmic touching and healing. I have come in My person to be the One who will be the resurrection and the life. I'm not just here to create miracles, to take away infirmities. I'm here to reroute the whole system. Martha, you don't just come to get things from Me. Martha, you come to get Me. I've not come just to give you gifts. Martha, I am the gift. I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever would believe in Me shall never die.” As Jesus

looks into the eyes of Martha, He wants Martha to see something that we need to see: That are we approaching Jesus because He's good for us, He'll do something for us, He's on our side — or do we approach Jesus because He is what we need? Have we seen Him to such a degree that we can say, "He is my resurrection and my life? Come what may with the suffering of this life, I would experience all of the pains of death if it meant I would have the treasure of Jesus, that He would be my resurrection and my life. Lazarus can die or be healed; it doesn't matter as long as Jesus is my resurrection and my life."

Do you see what Jesus does? He slowly but surely wants Martha, and He wants you, to wake up to this reality — that we are not Christians because Jesus has done something good for us. We are Christians because Jesus is for us. In His very person, He is our resurrection and our life. We don't come to Him tonight to manipulate and to cajole some healing out of Him as if He were a genie in a bottle. We come to Jesus because He is the treasure, and when he becomes the treasure, guess what — all other suffering and all other pains in this life, Paul will later say, are not even worthy to be compared to the Jesus that is your treasure. Have you noticed that a --- of the descriptions of the heavenly places, they include this reality, the strongest among all realities.

What is heaven, really? Is it your mansion? Is it all of the good things you think you're going to get? According to the New Testament, heaven is beholding the face of Jesus. And knowing that in that moment, all of the suffering and all of the mysteries behind our suffering, all of the death that has cling so closely to us, has now as we stare in His face, we can't even bring it to recollection for we have found our end. The difference between a Christian and the one who is just dabbling with Christianity is that the true Christian serves Jesus because he loves Jesus, and the one who's just dabbling serves Jesus because he wants something from Him. Who are you tonight? Have you embraced Jesus for Jesus? For the resurrection and the life that He is — whether you take my brother Lazarus or you heal him, I want my Jesus. For in that is peace, peace - evermore.

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