The Death of a Friend

Bible Background • JOHN 11:1–44
Printed Text • JOHN 11:38–44
Devotional Reading • ISAIAH 25:6–10

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: REVIEW the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead; REFLECT on why Lazarus’ resurrection may have been both joyous and sobering; and remember and celebrate the lives of those who have died and affected our faith.

In Focus

Franklin hesitantly ascended the steps of the church. It had been a long time since he’d been in any church, but he couldn’t stay away from DeShawn’s funeral. He still couldn’t believe that his friend had died so suddenly. He knew that DeShawn was in heaven, but that didn’t help the ache in Franklin’s heart.

The funeral started, and one by one, people shared how much DeShawn had meant to them. Franklin was touched when he heard the many testimonies of how DeShawn had shown God’s love to others.

Finally, the preacher came up to give the message. “Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’” the preacher said. “Those of us who have believed in Jesus Christ as our Savior know that we will see DeShawn again. We do not mourn as those who have no hope! We do have hope, and His name is Jesus.”

Franklin thought about the preacher’s words for several days afterwards. It had been a long time since he had hope of any kind. Maybe now was the time to gain new hope—the hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus has conquered death, we have hope. What can we do to keep our hope vibrant in the face of impossible situations?

Keep in Mind

“And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth” (John 11:43).
Focal Verses

**KJV**  John 11:38  Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

39 Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

40 Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?

41 Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.

42 And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.

43 And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.

44 And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

**NLT**  John 11:38  Jesus was still angry as he arrived at the tomb, a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance.

39 “Roll the stone aside,” Jesus told them. But Martha, the dead man’s sister, protested, “Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible.”

40 Jesus responded, “Didn’t I tell you that you would see God’s glory if you believe?”

41 So they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “Father, thank you for hearing me.

42 You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me.”

43 Then Jesus shouted, “Lazarus, come out!”

44 And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in grave clothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, “Unwrap him and let him go!”

The People, Places, and Times

**Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.** The two sisters, Mary and Martha, along with their brother Lazarus, were close friends of Jesus. The three of them apparently lived as a household in a village called Bethany. The Bible makes it clear in John 11:1–2 that this Mary was the same Mary who later poured perfume on Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair (John 12:1–3) at a dinner given in His honor.

These sisters were also the same Mary and Martha of the well-known story in Luke 10:38–42. Jesus was a guest in their home, and Martha complained that instead of helping her, Mary was sitting and listening to Jesus. Jesus gently rebuked Martha, pointing out that it is better to be concerned about spiritual things than worried about temporal things.
Mourning. Visiting and mourning with those who were bereaved was an essential part of Jewish life and community. Neighbors were expected to help provide the first meal after the funeral. After losing a loved one, the bereaved would spend the first week mourning at home, sitting on the floor surrounded by relatives, friends, and neighbors. This practice, called “sitting shiva,” is still practiced in Judaism today. In those days, it was not uncommon for the mourners to weep or wail loudly, and sometimes even “professional” mourners would be hired to come to the home. After the seven days, the bereaved would not wear any kind of adornment for three weeks and would often abstain from normal comforts or pleasure for an entire year after the death.

Background

According to John 11, Lazarus was very sick and his sisters thought it urgent enough to send word to Jesus that “the one you love is sick” (v. 4). Upon receiving this message, Jesus told His disciples that Lazarus’ sickness would not end in death, but would instead bring glory to God. Jesus, though He loved Lazarus and Lazarus’ sisters, did not immediately begin to journey to Bethany, but waited two days.

Finally, Jesus and His disciples began the long walk to Bethany. Upon their arrival, they learned that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. This is significant, because according to the Talmud, the Jews practiced the ancient custom of shemira, which means to guard the body. They believed that the dead person’s spirit stayed near the body for three days after death and that it was possible the person could “come back to life” during that time. By the fourth day, however, there was no hope.

As soon as they saw Jesus, Mary and Martha both expressed what they wholeheartedly believed: If Jesus had arrived while Lazarus was still living, Jesus would have healed him. But now the only hope they had was their belief that their brother would one day rise again in the resurrection of the last day. But Jesus announced to Martha that He is the Resurrection, and that anyone who believed in Him would live (v. 25).

Though knowing that He would ultimately raise Lazarus from the dead, Jesus was deeply moved by His friends’ grief, and He wept. At this, some of the mourners admired Him for the depth of His love for His friend. Others pointed out that if Jesus was capable of other miracles, He surely should have been capable of keeping Lazarus from death.

At-A-Glance

1. Jesus’ Instruction (John 11:38–39)
2. Jesus’ Prayer (vv. 40–42)
3. Jesus’ Triumph (vv. 43–44)
In Depth

1. Jesus’ Instruction (John 11:38–39)

Accompanied by Mary, Martha, and the crowd of mourners, Jesus approached Lazarus’ tomb. Verse 38 says that He again was deeply moved as He came to the tomb.

In biblical times, “graves” were often caves, usually sealed with a large stone to keep out wild animals or intruders. The burial typically took place on the day of death, and the body was wrapped very tightly in strips of cloth. The Jews did not embalm, using only some spices to cover the odor of rotting flesh. The body remained in the tomb for eleven months until it decomposed, then the bones would be in an ossuary and stored on a shelf of the family’s tomb.

Martha, though she no doubt wanted to trust Jesus, was horrified at His instruction to remove the stone. She remonstrated with Jesus, reminding Him that Lazarus had already been dead for four days; there was no hope that he was still alive—and surely there would be a terrible smell by now. But Jesus wanted the onlookers to know without a doubt that this truly was the dead man coming back to life, a man who would have to walk through the opening of the tomb back out into the sunlight—not a ghost or figment of their imaginations.

2. Jesus’ Prayer (vv. 40–44)

Jesus then reminded Martha of what He had already told her earlier (v. 25): that if she believed, she would see the glory of God. This glory of God revealed the awesome power of Christ over even the power of death.

The stone was rolled away. Jesus looked up to heaven and prayed out loud, so that those around Him could hear it. Significantly, His first words thanked God in advance for what God would do through Him. The words of His prayer also bore witness to His personal and powerful relationship with God, and illustrate Jesus’ perfect confidence that God always heard His prayers. Lastly, Jesus points out that the miracle about to occur was for the benefit of those watching, that they might believe that Jesus had truly been sent from God.

3. Jesus’ Triumph (vv. 43–44)

Jesus could have silently summoned Lazarus from the dead. But once again, He was mindful of the crowd looking on. Since His goal was to reveal God’s glory, He called loudly, “Lazarus, come out!” Immediately, the dead man came shuffling out of the grave. There was no delay between Jesus’ command and Lazarus’ obedience, just like the resurrection of the last day which will be “in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:52).

Not only was Lazarus alive again, but he was actually walking. His hands and feet were still bound with strips of cloth, and the burial napkin still covered his face. Those in the crowd knew that it really was Lazarus, not some imposter. Jesus instructed those around him to take Lazarus’ grave clothes off and set him free. As they unwound his grave clothes, they would touch him and see him for themselves, thus experiencing tangible proof of Jesus’ power and divinity.
Search the Scriptures

1. Why was Jesus “groaning” (KJV) or “angry” (NLT) as He approached Lazarus’ tomb (John 11:38)?

2. Was raising Lazarus from the dead conditional on Martha’s faith? Why or why not (v. 40)?

Discuss the Meaning

People have a difficult time dealing with death, especially the death of a loved one. How might Lazarus’ resurrection have been both a joyful and sobering event for those in attendance?

Lesson in Our Society

Whether the tragic loss of a friend or family member, through a violent act or a peaceful home going, all of us have at least observed the loss and grief that death brings. Thank God that as believers, we can confess with Martha that Jesus is the promised Messiah and Son of God. We can rejoice that, by raising Lazarus, Jesus revealed Himself as “the resurrection and the life.” And, even while mourning the loss of loved ones, we confess and believe that for the Christian, death is not final.

Make It Happen

We live in a world where death is inevitable. It could be easy to live in hopelessness and fear, but we know that we serve Jesus, who doesn’t just perform resurrections—He is resurrection and life. This week, make a conscious effort to thank Him for the gift of eternal life and comfort those who are grieving with the hope found only in Christ.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do.

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned.
More Light on the Text

John 11:38–44

38 Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

Jesus is approaching the grave of His friend Lazarus. As He approaches, He begins groaning (Gk. *embrimaomai*, *embr-MAY-o-may*) in Himself. The word for groaning is etymologically related to the word for “to snort in anger.” The NLT has translated this as “angry,” which could mean that Jesus was angry at the people’s unbelief or due to the sorrow death causes in people’s lives (*John 11:33*). In this context, anger is not out of the question.

The Greek word used here for grave (*mnemeion*, *mnay-MAY-o-nay*) can also refer to anything visible that recalls the memory of a person or thing. The graves of first-century Palestine were usually caves with a stone disk placed in front. These caves would contain vertical or horizontal vaults constructed out from the main chamber. The stone disk would be placed in front of the main chamber. This would protect the corpse from wild animals, the elements, and the possibility of grave robbers.

39 Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

With intentionality, Jesus commands the men around Him to take away the stone. This is the first of three commands associated with this miracle. Martha comments in protest that by this time, the dead body of Lazarus “stinketh” (Gk.*ozo*, *OD-zoh*). This word is used in the New Testament only here in John. It is also used in the Septuagint to describe the stench of the dead frogs from the second plague of Egypt (*Exodus 8:10*). Martha adds that Lazarus has been dead four days. Note that this is one day longer than the time Jesus would spend in the grave. By the fourth day, the body would begin to decompose, the reason behind the smell mentioned by Martha. Bodies decomposed quickly in Palestine because they were not embalmed. People would anoint the bodies with spices in order to mask the smell.

40 Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?

In response to Martha’s protest, Jesus asks her a question. He points to His statement (vv. 25–26) asserting that those who believe (Gk. *pisteuo*, *pees-TEW-o-h*) would never die. This word for belief is very familiar in the New Testament. It means to think to be true, to be persuaded, to place confidence in. In effect, He is saying placing one’s confidence in Him would allow them to see the glory (Gk.*doxa*, *DOK-sah*) of God. The word “glory” in classical Greek literature has the meaning of what one thinks, an opinion. In the objective sense, it is used favorably as reputation or renown—what one is worth based on reputation. In the New Testament, it takes on a religious meaning connected with the Old Testament concept of glory, which expressed the impressiveness
of God in relation to man (cf. *Exodus 33:18*, *Luke 2:9*). In this verse, Jesus correlates the glory of God with the power of resurrection He spoke of (vv. 25–26).

41 Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. 42 And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.

It would have taken several men to roll such a large stone away from the tomb. After they do so, Jesus lifts His eyes to heaven. This is a traditional Jewish way of praying as opposed to the familiar Western way of bowing the head and closing the eyes. Jesus prays with the knowledge of His Father’s will. This is shown in His expression of thanksgiving. He acknowledges that God the Father hears Him always (Gk. *pantote*, *PAN-toe-teh*). Jesus uses this word twice in John in connection with the Father. In *John 8:29*, Jesus declares that He always does those things that please God the Father. This points toward the unique relationship Jesus has with the Father as the only begotten Son.

Jesus wants to give a glimpse of this picture to those standing by (Gk. *peristemi*, *peh-REES-tay-mee*); it is not clear whether they are in mourning or just a crowd gathered to witness Jesus’ next action. Jesus wants them to believe that the Father has sent (Gk. *apostello*, *ah-poh-STEL-loh*) Him. In this way, the act of raising Lazarus would mark Jesus as unique and point toward His resurrection as the Son of God.

43 And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. 44 And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

Jesus then issues a prayer of command. Unlike a petition, it is an expression of faith in what God has already done. The text says that Jesus cried (Gk. *kraugazo*, *krow-GAHD-zo*) with a loud voice. The word means to cry aloud, not indicating a particular emotion but extreme feeling expressed loudly. The crying out could be connected with great joy or great grief. He calls Lazarus from the grave. His words can also be translated as “Come out!” It gives the appearance that Lazarus may have already been alive and all Jesus had to do was to call him out of the grave.

John records Lazarus coming out of the grave being “bound hand and foot with grave clothes.” These would have been long cloth strips used to wrap the body. The head was also wrapped up with a napkin, which was a cloth used for keeping the corpse’s mouth shut. The tightness of these clothes made this event even more miraculous, as it would have been hard for anyone to walk in such attire.

### Say It Correctly

Lazarus. **LA-zer-us.**
Bethany. **BETH-ah-nee.**
Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY
Trust in Facing Death
(Psalm 56)

TUESDAY
Life Eternal
(Isaiah 25:6–10)

WEDNESDAY
Darkness Dispelled
(Matthew 4:12–17)

THURSDAY
For God’s Glory
(John 11:1–6)

FRIDAY
I am Life
(John 11:17–27)

SATURDAY
Jesus Wept
(John 11:28–37)

SUNDAY
The Death of a Friend
(John 11:38–44)