

## “If You Believed You Would See the Glory of God”

### Signs of Life

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When we drove back from western Kansas this week, we traveled Interstate 70 just above Salina. Once past the city, you notice signs for Abilene. The small green and white road side markers announce so many miles to go before arriving there. As the miles disappear, there are larger billboards alerting travelers to attractions in Abilene. Then at the edge of the town, near the main exit, there is a very large billboard featuring President Eisenhower, since his memorial library is the most significant feature in Abilene.

As we have traveled through the gospel of John, he has been identifying signs which point forward to Jesus' death. These signs are not highway billboards, but miracles revealing more and more who Jesus is and what he came to do. Just before reaching the climactic event in Jesus' life, the crucifixion, John describes the most significant sign that Jesus performs. We see that sign in our Scripture reading earlier. Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from death. I invite you to return to John 11 on p. 897.

John leaves several clues revealing the significance of this sign. The first clue is the sheer length of the narrative. Some of Jesus' other signs fill only a few verses. Others take up an entire chapter. The relatively long account of the man born blind comprises chapter 9. Yet, the account of Jesus' raising Lazarus not only includes the 44 verses that we heard today, but, also, the rest of chapter 11 (thirteen verses), and the first 11 verses of chapter 12, 68 verses in all.



A second clue is Jesus' movement from one location to another specifically to perform this sign. He has been camping in the wilderness across the Jordan River where he had been baptized. We know from chapter 1 that this is Bethany-beyond-Jordan (1:28, red dot above the Dead Sea in the yellow-shaded region on the map). He will leave here to travel to another Bethany, the home of his friend Lazarus. This Bethany is just east of Jerusalem on the Mt. of Olives where Jesus will soon be arrested. Though Jesus always acts with purpose and forethought, his other signs appear to happen as the opportunity arises (e.g., turning water into wine at the wedding feast in chapter 2). But this climactic sign involves intentional movement for a specific purpose.

A third clue that this is his final, climactic sign is the level of emotion Jesus displays through it. In other situations, Jesus seems to act matter-of-factly. But as Jesus encounters Mary, Lazarus' sister, in v. 33, he is “deeply moved” and “greatly troubled.” V. 38 he repeats that Jesus is deeply moved. This one word in Greek can mean to be angry or agitated. The other word “troubled” has not been applied to Jesus up to this point. But he will describe himself this way in John 12 as he approaches the cross, and again in Ch. 13 as he announces his betrayal. These are strong words. As Jesus prepares to perform his climactic sign pointing to his own death and resurrection, he is deeply, emotionally engaged.

A fourth clue that there is something climactic about raising Lazarus is the number of people with whom Jesus interacts as he performs this sign. On other occasions we see him interacting with the person he heals and, perhaps, his disciples. In this incident, John relates an extended discussion with his disciples about

Lazarus before he goes to him. Then we read of Jesus' encounter with Lazarus' sister, Martha. Then we watch him deal with the other sister Mary. Then there is Lazarus himself, a dead man raised to life.

It is to these encounters to which I draw your attention. In each of them, Jesus reveals something of who he is and what it means to follow him. As we look at each one, may the Holy Spirit lead us to see Jesus more vividly, to know Jesus' love more intensely, to trust him more personally, and to follow him more faithfully.

## Jesus Challenges His Disciples (11:1-16)

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A messenger sent from Mary and Martha announces to Jesus that his friend, their brother, Lazarus is desperately sick and near death (v. 1-3). Jesus hints that he will respond and keep Lazarus from dying while at the same glorifying God and himself (v. 4). His disciples likely assume that he might heal Lazarus from a distance as he had with the Roman army officer's servant in Luke 7. Two days later, Jesus summons his disciples to come with him to Judea (v. 7, the region around Jerusalem, center of green area on left of map). In v. 8 the disciples remind Jesus that the last time they had been in Judea people tried to stone him. The disciples are afraid. Those who want to kill Jesus will take them out too. In v. 16, Thomas gives up trying to stop Jesus and resigns himself to the real possibility that the disciples will die with Jesus. They are scared. Fear paralyzes them.



Jesus' response to his disciples' fear seems strange (vv. 9-10). He asks them about the number of daylight hours. He reminds them of the obvious fact that walking during darkness makes one prone to stumble which is not true during daylight. He uses a common fact of life to express profound truth. "I know exactly how long I have before my darkness comes and I die. It will happen on my timetable." In chapter 10 he affirmed that he has the power to lay down his life and to take it again. No one takes his life from him. They can go to Jerusalem because nothing will happen to them that is not in the plan of God.

Christian, Jesus is in complete control. Nothing happens to you that is not in his plan for you. The moment and means of your death is under his authority. You are invincible until he is done with you. In Kansas City this week I heard Pastor John Onwuchekwa speak. He told the story of visiting his parents' native Nigeria with his family and girlfriend. As they prepared to leave the country, a band of terrorist ambushed them and forced them onto the ground at gunpoint. John remembers thinking how empty his life seemed at the moment. He had thought he was living the good life. He was playing college basketball in the United States. He intended to spend the rest of his life with the love of his life. But, he realized that he had turned away from Jesus Christ. Facing the ground and certain death, he repented. He told God that he would spend whatever life he had to tell others how good God is. An unlikely set of circumstances led to his release. He is now the lead pastor of Cornerstone Church in Atlanta, Georgia leading many to know and follow Jesus Christ. Death had no power over him so long as God had plans for him.

Jesus knows exactly what he is doing. He holds authority over death. When you see the sovereignty of God you will risk anything for his glory. Nothing can thwart his purpose. George Whitefield was an evangelist of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. One of his biographers writes, "When opposition to his preaching resulted in churches closing their doors to him, he began preaching wherever and whenever the opportunity presented itself.... As an itinerant preacher he was tireless. In his nearly thirty-four years of ministry he spoke more than fifteen thousand times to literally millions of people. In addition to Wales, Ireland, and his own England, he made fourteen visits to Scotland and seven trips across the Atlantic to the American colonies ...." Whitefield attempted high and hazardous things for Christ saying, "We are immortal until our work on earth is done."

What fears keep you from following Christ wholeheartedly? It could be anything up to and including the fear of death. Let's give the disciples credit. Despite their fear, they go with Jesus back to the danger zone. They do not quit. But, in their fear, they do not walk in the confidence of what the Lord intended to do. He wants them to know that, even if Lazarus dies, they will see the glory of God. Lazarus' sickness includes death, but it will not end in death. If we follow Christ we may lose our lives, but we will see the glory of God. We can say with Paul, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Death cannot separate us from the Father's love (Romans 8:38-39). John Onwucheckwa could have been shot by the terrorists in Nigeria. But death could not snatch him from Christ. We are immortal until our work on earth is done. Parents, this is the only way we can commit our children to serve Christ in some place far from us. Nothing happens to them except as the Lord wills. Such faith frees the Christian not merely to follow but to follow with deep joy. We say with David:

Psalm 56:3-4 When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. <sup>4</sup> In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?

### Martha Confesses Jesus (11:17-28; 38-40)

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The next encounter in this climactic miracle involves Lazarus' sisters, Martha. As Jesus nears Bethany Martha learns of his arrival and leaves the family home to meet him (vv. 19-20). She notes that if Jesus had arrived sooner, he could have prevented this death (v. 21). John does not tell us why Martha speaks this way. Ever the efficient one, perhaps she's wondering what went wrong. Were there unforeseen delays? Could more have been done? Yet her faith is strong. She believes that God will answer Jesus' prayer (v. 22). She believes in the future resurrection when Lazarus will rise again (v. 24).

Jesus responds to Martha's affirmation of future resurrection with what seems like a contradiction.

John 11:25-26 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

Jesus claims that the resurrection is not primarily a future event, but that he, a person, is the resurrection. He then draws two conclusions. First, whoever believes in Jesus will live even if he dies. Second, those who believe in him will never die. If "die" means the same in both conclusions, then Jesus contradicts himself. He cannot mean that, by faith, one will live after death but, also, that one cannot die. If this is not a contradiction, what's Jesus up to? He's growing Martha's faith in him. In the first conclusion, dying refers to physical death. Those who die physically will live again at the resurrection. The Bible teaches that those who trust in Christ look forward to fully renewed bodies in a completely restored creation. Physical death is a temporary separation of body and spirit. Those who die in Christ enjoy his fellowship until he returns to make everything new.

In the second conclusion, "die" refers to spiritual death. This is the death that came upon all human beings through Adam. God told him that if he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, he would die. When he disobeyed and ate that fruit, he began to die physically. But Adam also experienced separation between himself and God. He no longer could or wanted to enjoy God's fellowship. He became alienated from the God whose image he bore. His spirit became hollowed out with an emptiness that only God could fill. The Bible says that death passed to all of us because of our participation with Adam in rebellion against God.

Jesus tells Martha that anyone who believes in him is restored to the spiritual life forfeited through sin. The life Jesus restores is eternal life. This life does not begin at the future resurrection or at physical death. It

begins the moment Christ establishes a relationship by faith. It belongs to the one who lives in Christ right now. Jesus reveals himself to Martha not only as the one who asks the Father for life and guarantees life after a future resurrection. He does not come merely to heal the sick or even raise the dead back to physical life. He is, right now, the resurrection and the life. He will die on the cross to deal with the very sin problem that caused spiritual death in the first place. His presence now by faith assures us that death cannot have the last word and sin cannot hold us under God's wrath. The one who has Christ can never die.

Jesus asks Martha the question we must all answer. Do you believe this? Her response rightly focuses on Jesus. She confesses that He is the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world from the Father (v. 27). This is the same confession Peter makes about Jesus in Matthew 16:16. What Jesus tells Peter holds true for Martha.

Matthew 16:17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you ... for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

Martha's confession is proof that God has done a work in her. She is living and believing in Jesus as God's promised deliverer from sin and death. She is not merely speaking words. She is confessing from the heart the truth about Jesus. Do you confess Christ in this way? Has the Holy Spirit revealed to you who Jesus really is, the Author of true life? Do you trust him as the only one who can give life to those hopelessly dead in sin? Do you realize that, without him, you are hopelessly dead in sin? If you are trusting him, he is even now giving you life that never ends.

It is not that Martha understands all that Jesus will do. Later in vv. 39-40, she objects to opening her brother's grave because of the odor four days after death. Jesus gently rebukes her and urges her to look for God to display his glory. She is so much like us. We know that Jesus has given us new life, but when he asks us to do something, we focus on all the bad that we are sure will happen. We want to control the future and protect ourselves rather than trust him. But we neither know nor control the future. We can only trust and obey. Like Martha, we're still learning to trust. But we know the one worthy of our trust. Do you know him?

## Jesus Comforts Mary (11:29-37)

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As we move closer to the climactic event at Lazarus' grave, Jesus meets Mary. She too leaves the house to find Jesus. She too laments that Jesus could have saved Lazarus from death had he come sooner. But John adds that Mary falls before Jesus' feet, crying (v. 32). This is where she longs to be. In the next chapter, John will describe Mary anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume in preparation for his burial (John 12:3-7). Luke describes Mary sitting at Jesus' feet to learn from him and worship him (Luke 10:38-42). Her devotion stirs Jesus' emotions. V. 33 says he is deeply moved in spirit and greatly troubled. V. 35 describes how he weeps with Mary. His weeping expresses love for Lazarus (v. 36). It expresses anger against the intrusion of sin and death into his beautiful creation. It also expresses sadness at the unbelief of people who thought that he came merely to give blind people sight or keep people from dying for a few more years (v. 37). He weeps, longing that people see him as their true Savior, the only one who forgives their sin and free them from its condemnation.

Jesus says nothing to Mary. He simply joins in her sorrow. He shows his perfect wisdom to deal with each of his loved ones personally and carefully. When we are hurting most deeply, Jesus' silence does not mean that he has abandoned us. He sympathizes with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15). He tastes death for us (Hebrews 2:9). He is the man of sorrows who bears our grief (Isaiah 53). Let the waves of your grief carry you to Jesus. He will walk with you in your sorrow.

## Jesus Calls Lazarus (11:5-6; 38-44)

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The fourth encounter surrounding this climactic sign does not involve a conversation. Lazarus says nothing to Jesus. And Jesus says but one sentence to Lazarus. It is the command in v. 43. Jesus stands at the entrance to the cave that was Lazarus' grave. He cries, "Lazarus, come out." Others note that Jesus' power to give life was so great that if he had not mentioned Lazarus' name specifically, every corpse in the cemetery would have revived. But Jesus calls Lazarus by name. His words give the life that allow Lazarus to obey the Lord's call. He steps out of the cave still covered in the wrappings of death. Jesus commands those who had been mourning to release him.

At the outset of this story John tells us about Jesus' love for Lazarus and his sisters. His love led him to wait two days before coming (vv. 5-6). This is sovereign love that can leave a loved one suffering to bring about a more glorious ending. This is the same Jesus who loves us today. He allows us to remain in suffering now so that we can meet him in a more glorious resurrection. Can we trust Jesus to withhold something in the moment so that we delight in him more in the long run? Can we receive such love?

Notice in vv. 41-42, Jesus reveals that, before he speaks to Lazarus, he has been speaking about Lazarus to his Father. He has been praying for him. We do not know exactly when he prays for Lazarus' restoration. In v. 41 he simply thanks his Father for hearing his prayer. Christian, if you feel as though Jesus is not acting for you, be assured that he is always praying for you. What he asks the Father will certainly accomplish. He always hears and answers his Son's prayer. We have life because Jesus prays for us. In John 17 Jesus prays not only for his present disciples but for all who would believe in him through their word including every believe here now (John 17:20).

When Jesus speaks, his words gave life. One moment Lazarus is dead and decaying. The next he is alive and walking. He does nothing to revive himself. He simply responds to the gift of new life by moving toward Jesus. This is the way we all came to Christ. The Holy Spirit used the word of the gospel to give us new life and we responded and came to Christ by faith. We did not deserve or accomplish our new life. Jesus, by his Spirit, imparted it to us. We now spend our lives in fellowship with others seeking to remove all the old grave clothes of sin from around us and walk in the new life that Christ has given. Lazarus' story is the perfect sign pointing us to Christ. By his own death and resurrection, Jesus gives life to all who trust in him. If he has done that for you, you can trust him with every step of your life now and forever.