

Loose Him and Let Him Go

John 11

Chris Farnworth

Brighton - April 19, 2020

A Picture of our Master

I have chosen John's Gospel chapter 11 for the basis of today's exhortation; if asked why, I would have to say because it is lovely in every meaning of that overly used word. As we read through it we are treated to imagery of our Master that perhaps is not so readily available in the other Gospels. It begins thus:

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.

Jesus had a close relationship with this family and clearly the sisters of Lazarus might have thought that because Jesus loved him and that He had healed others, it augured well that Jesus would heal Lazarus. It is interesting that the messenger does not ask Jesus to come and heal Lazarus, it must have been well known that Jesus could cure at a distance, all that was necessary was to let Jesus know that Lazarus was sick; therefore both the sisters and probably the messenger as well were displaying the necessary faith.

For an earlier example of this we might turn to Jesus' first miracle, when at the wedding at Cana His mother said, they have no wine, there was no stating what was to be done, all that was necessary was to relate to Jesus what the problem was. That is possibly the first point we need to understand, the absolute essential requirement of faith.

God Knows the Right Time

The second point we might consider is that in our prayers, God does not need to be informed of what we believe is to be the best answer to those prayers. We must leave it to the Lord Almighty to answer our prayers in the way that He, with His infinite knowledge, knows is best, even if on the surface we do not see any apparent improvement in our circumstances, where we might believe that the prayer is unanswered.

The third wonderful aspect of these opening words is the fact that Jesus loved Lazarus; we ought to pause here for a moment and consider the magnitude of these words, what a wonderful thing to be loved by Jesus; but then earlier in this Gospel we have those precious words that

God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but the world through Him might be saved.

It is clear then that love is another important aspect of this account.

The word behold used by the messenger however would alert one to the perceived urgency of the situation. The response of Jesus is at first somewhat puzzling; when Jesus heard that, He said,

This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

Whatever our first thoughts regarding this strange response, we are fortified with verse 5, reminding us of Jesus' relationship with this family, Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. It should be remembered that the disciple whom Jesus loved was freely describing Jesus' love for others; there is no hint of jealousy here.

Then we are told something that initially might challenge this verse:

so, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was.

Why The Delay

It is almost certain that by this time Jesus knew that Lazarus was dead. Why did Jesus delay in coming to Martha and Mary? Well we may be sure that we were informed of this in John's Gospel for our benefit. We must not lose sight of the messenger's role here; he would have taken Jesus' words back to the sisters only to find that Lazarus was in his tomb, so what comfort would these words have for those to whom they were directed?

Both Martha and Mary were convinced that their brother would have been cured if Jesus had come right away, as they both aver later in this account. So what would they have thought when the messenger spoke the cryptic message, This sickness is not unto death? Add to the sadness of these two sisters the conundrum that they heard from the messenger, would it not have caused them to doubt the Lord? We might place ourselves in this situation, how would we have felt if someone we loved died because help was delayed? Was their faith in the Lord being

tested at that time? Will our faith be similarly tested in these present dark days and the subsequent days to come?

The 1 Corinthians 10:13 gives us the wonderful hope that

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

The sisters of Lazarus play out this lesson for us; their temptation in doubting the Lord would initially have been strong considering the grief of their loss, and not knowing why Jesus had not come, but they overcame it. After this Jesus then said to the disciples

Let us go to Judea again. The disciples said to Him, Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone You, and are You going there again?

Faith in the Midst of Delay

In the previous chapter we have the description of this incident where Jesus came close to being stoned. His disciples were understandably concerned for His safety, and possibly also their own. This may also explain why the sisters did not ask Jesus to travel to Judea, as this would put Him in danger, He was at this time on the eastern side of the River Jordan.

Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in

the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.

The interpretation of this allegorical statement could be that God had given His Son a certain amount of time to accomplish what He must, and that the world could do Him no harm until His allotted time was up, whereon He would fall into the hands of His enemies. The message for us therefore is that time is precious and should not be wasted; in our case mercifully, we do not know what our allotted portion is.

He said to them, Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up. Then His disciples said, Lord, if he sleeps he will get well. However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him.

Jesus uses the term sleep to mean death, He used it to describe Jairus' daughter, which brought Him ridicule from those who did not believe Him. The term was used by Luke to describe the death of Stephen. Why was Jesus glad for their sakes that He was not there?

Temporary Suffering is to the Glory of God

Firstly, it enabled Jesus to be glorified by performing a more "difficult" miracle of raising Lazarus after the certainty that corruption had by then already begun. Secondly, it provided a situation that those who had witnessed the miracle, and it is recorded in verse 45, many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had

seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him. Thirdly, it set in motion the unalterable consequences that would lead to the necessary death of Jesus.

Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."

There are references to the fact that Thomas looked like Jesus, which is why he was called the Twin in Greek; and if so then his suggestion of Let us also go, that we may die with Him was a truly brave thing to suggest. If Jesus were to die, then He would not die alone; Thomas was calling the disciples to go with him. We might pause here, Thomas was in effect saying, if Jesus were to die, what did life hold for the rest of them, they might just as well be dead.

But Thomas was not in possession of all the facts, he was not aware of the importance of Jesus' sacrificial death to come. Harry Whittaker in his "Studies in the Gospels" raises the question regarding Thomas' exhortation, why did Peter not expound these thoughts? Was it that he was not present? But we must leave that aspect for another time.

So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother. Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Then 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 of God, God will give You.

Martha's faith in Jesus was still as strong as it was for she knew that all Jesus had to do was to ask God for Lazarus to be returned to them, even though it had been four days since his death.

Onlookers' Wrong Beliefs Proved False

We might mention that another reason why Jesus might have allowed four days to pass before He came to the sisters was the superstitious belief of the Jews that the soul remained near to the grave for three days and by the fourth all hope was lost, that there was truly no hope of resurrection. There was still a crowd of Jews present at Mary and Martha's house even after four days and many of these became converts after the miracle of Lazarus' raising.

We might at this point consider the Greek script, and how the expression "The Jews" has another meaning in Greek apart from "the people of Palestine." In John's Gospel the expression "The Jews" can have a negative slant indicating those hostile to Jesus, especially the national leaders. Did the presence of many Jews verse 19 indicate that the family of Lazarus had considerable social standing, which included prominent Jews? Had they come in the hope of meeting Jesus and perhaps of witnessing a miracle? If so then they were not to be disappointed!

Jesus comforts Martha with the wonderful words that Martha initially misinterprets; Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. We might consider that these words were of small comfort to Martha, who was thinking of the general raising up on

the last day, she was hoping that in spite of the late arrival of Jesus, if He asked God then a miraculous raising might, even now happen.

Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes 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 to come into the world."

What a wonderful affirmation! What wonderful faith after all she had gone through. Jesus did not claim to have resurrection and life, or understand secrets about resurrection and life. Instead Jesus dramatically said that He is the resurrection and the life. Because He is "the life" and has life in Himself, Jesus is able to give life (abundant life now and eternal in the future) to all who place their trust in Him.

The account continues in verse 28.

And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you." As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him.

We might wonder at this word secretly. Although the Jews were present in the house, when Mary came to Jesus outside (for Jesus did not enter the house) it afforded a little time for Mary and Jesus to have a brief period of privacy together before the arrival of the other mourners. The Teacher has come is the only

identification given but Mary immediately knows who is meant by the term, maybe that is how Jesus was known in their house, however the term is accurate for when we look at the activities of our Lord in His ministry, teaching is the one thing that takes up most of His time. Previously Nicodemus acknowledges the fact that He is a teacher

*Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God;
for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is
with him*

It is interesting to compare the two different emphases that Nicodemus and Martha put on the word “teacher”. Nicodemus uses the indefinite article “*a* teacher” whereas Martha uses the definite article “*the* Teacher”; also we might comment that Rab- bis did not teach women, but Jesus had a different perspective on this.

A True Disciple at the Resurrection

Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Mary’s words are very similar to those of Martha’s; this is hardly surprising, as they must have been telling each other this in the days immediately after Lazarus’ death. We can imagine that Mary was so overcome with emotion that she was incapable of uttering more than those few words, which to some may seem like a rebuke. All she could do was show her respect and fall at His feet. We are then treated to a wonderful display of Jesus’ human side.

Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews

who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.

We need to examine the Greek terms here to be accurate in our understanding. In verses 31 and 33 the Greek word for weep is *klaio* and is used of any loud expression of grief, especially of mourning for the dead; however in the expression Jesus wept, the Greek word here is *dakruo* which means to shed tears and is used only of Jesus in this one instance. This is quite as we would expect, a silent shedding of tears by our Lord in complete contrast to the loud wailing of the Jewish mourners. We have to remember that in those times the louder the wailing the greater was the respect shown to the deceased. The other time in scripture where we read of Jesus weeping is when Luke records that Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem as He warned the multitude gathered around that the rebellious city was going to be encompassed by its enemies and completely destroyed (Luke 19:41-44). He was prophesying of Israel's destruction by the Roman army in A.D. 70. Here, the word translated wept is *klaio* and is used of any loud expression of grief.

Jesus Wept

The two words, Jesus wept: can be viewed in several ways. Jesus was truly a man and therefore could show human emotions; also there is no shame in tears. Jesus was acquainted with grief and was not ashamed of His humanity and could identify with others in their sorrow. If Jesus can weep over the death of some-

one He loved then clearly it is acceptable for us to do the same.

See how He loved him, exclaimed the Jews when they saw Jesus' tears. Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, Take away the stone. Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days. Jesus said to her, Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?

In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint uses the same word to describe the smell (ozo) coming off the piles of dead frogs, which were heaped up after the second Egyptian plague. Its use in the present context underpins the fact that Lazarus was truly dead and already undergoing corruption.

If you would believe you would see the glory of God: Jesus was fully capable of this miracle without the faith of Martha or Mary. But if they would not believe, then they would never see the glory of God. This glory is first mentioned in Jesus' comment on hearing that Lazarus was sick,

This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me. Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come

forth! And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, Loose him, and let him go.

Be Loosed. Sickness is not 'Unto Death'

What a wonderful account to have in our minds as we prepare to take the emblems, we do not need to tarnish it with the subsequent description of the actions of the Jews who sought to take our Lord's life. As we said at the beginning, this example of our Lord's ministry has been chosen because of its loveliness, but also because it reveals very important teaching to take with us as we head into the uncertain and dark days of the morrow;

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.

Chris Farnworth