

WRAPPED

Dying to Change | The Lazarus Life (Part 7)

Text: John 11:43

We have been studying together during this Lenten season the story of Christ's transforming work in the life of a man named Lazarus. The very name Lazarus, as I explained weeks ago, literally means "*One whom God helps.*" Lazarus is important not only because he is a particular person in need of God's grace, but also because he is like all of us who need God's help.

The first thing we discover about Lazarus is that he is sick (John 11:1). It's the crucial characteristic we find out about him – even before we learn that Lazarus lives in a town called Bethany or has sisters named Mary and Martha. The gospel writer, John, is telling this story in a carefully chosen way to stress that the primary condition of Lazarus' life at this time is this sickness.

The text goes on to say: **So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." (John 11:3)** We know from the chapter before that Jesus is about a day's walk away up the Jordan River. Let's suppose, then, that the sisters' messenger leaves on Monday and arrives on Tuesday. The text goes on to say: **So when [Jesus] heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days (John 11:6)** For mysterious reasons, Jesus waits two more days before deciding to go to Bethany, so now it is Thursday. It takes a day's walk for him to get there, so he arrives on Friday. It has now been four days since Mary and Martha said, "Oh my goodness, we'd better call Jesus." And then we're told that Jesus found that **On his arrival, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. (John 11:17)**

Are you getting this timetable? If Jesus gets there on the fourth day after the message went out and Lazarus has been in the tomb four days, what do you know is true? Apparently, Lazarus DIED the very day his sisters noticed he was sick enough to merit calling Jesus. In other words, Lazarus was obviously seriously sick and speeding toward death long before it showed enough that it raised alarm for his family members.

Sickness is like that. It can penetrate and permeate its host, doing all kinds of damage, before the devastation becomes so total that it takes its ultimate toll. People can go on like normal for a long time without even realizing that they are already desperately and dangerously in need of help. And -- as Jesus so often said when confronting people's physical blindness, paralysis, or hunger -- what is true of the body may be even more true of the soul. We can be very soul-sick before we realize we need help. We can be blind to the reality that sin is destroying our life from the inside out and, if unaddressed, will ultimately lead to spiritual death. We can deny that the problems we are having with our politics, our planet, and our relationships come from our selfishness, sinful passion, and turning from God. We can apply band-aids to our spiritual cancer, but we can't avoid the consequences: **For the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23).**

This is why we so need Jesus. We need the one who says: **I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die (John 11:25)**. You see, when Jesus goes on to raise Lazarus from his tomb it is more than an act of love toward one man or family. It is a sign to you and to me, that neither physical nor spiritual death need destroy us in the end, if we put our trust in him. As we've seen in this story, the salvation we seek may not come on our timetable, but it will come. So

act of love toward one man or family. It is a sign to you and to me, that neither physical nor spiritual death need destroy us in the end, if we put our trust in him. As we've seen in this story, the salvation we seek may not come on our timetable, but it will come. So be bold, like Mary and Martha, to ask Jesus for the HELP you need right now. Ask him for the forgiving grace, for the cleansing grace, for the sustaining, guiding, or lifting grace you need to rise up out of whatever tomb you fear. There will come a day when Jesus says to all who turn to him for help, I have it for you: **"Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43)**

I will not pretend that trusting God in times of turmoil or even hearing his voice is easy. We want to believe that there is a power for new beginnings... We want to walk through this life with the kind of hope and freedom that comes from knowing that Jesus has already overcome our sin and death and that we will be OK. But it can be a struggle to get there. We are like the picture of Lazarus we get in the last verse of his story, and I quote: **The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." (John 11:44)**

Think about this with me. Lazarus has been gifted with the power of new life. But he isn't free yet to pursue that new life, because he is still fettered in a significant way. Lazarus is still WRAPPED in the linens of death, constrained by strips of his old life that hamper his movement and mask his vision (2 Cor 5:17). Jesus wants him to walk through this world as a new creation. But in too many ways, Lazarus is still a mummy. He needs further help from beyond himself, if he is to truly walk free.

In an analogous sense, I wonder if that's not also true of you and me. I wonder if some of us who are already so deeply loved by Jesus, whose lives are going to be finally and fully resurrected and redeemed, are still WRAPPED and fettered like Lazarus was. I wonder if the strips of our old life are keeping us from fully entering the new.

I read recently of some students from Strayer University who set up a chalkboard on the sidewalk near a park in New York City. At the top of the board they chalked a simple question: **"What's your biggest regret?"** The chalkboard attracted the attention of quite a few people. In a surprisingly brief time, it was filled to overflowing with answers both poignant and thought-provoking. *"I regret... Burning bridges... Never speaking up... Not being a good husband... Not spending more time with my family... Staying in my comfort zone... Not saying 'I love you'... Not making the most of every day... Not being a better friend."* Strip by strip, people aired their dirty linens – the remorse and regret that was still WRAPPED around them, holding them back, keeping them from walking in freedom or joy.

I understand the remorse those people expressed on that board, and imagine you do too. We all have our regrets. They wrap around our minds and hearts like linens stinking of death and hopelessness. But Jesus wants those grave clothes off of us. He has commissioned those of us within the Body of Christ to help strip those regrets off of one another. He has called us to the foot of this cross today to remember the reason WHY we can, with authority and confidence proclaim that our sins have been forgiven, that a new way is possible, that He has erased sin and death and opened the door to new life – because HE has WRAPPED us now in something far greater than our mortality.

On August 16, 1987, Northwest Airlines flight 225 crashed, shortly after take-off from Detroit airport, ending the lives of almost all onboard. As emergency workers rallied to the scene, they found a four-year-old child wandering amidst the wreckage. She identified herself as "Cecelia." Investigators first assumed that Cecelia must have been from one of the cars on the highway onto which the plane had crashed. But when the the airline passenger list was checked, there was Cecelia's name.

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Gradually, the pieces of the story came together. As the plane was falling, Cecelia's mother, unbuckled her own seat belt. She got down on her knees in front of her daughter, and WRAPPED her arms and body around Cecelia, refusing to let her go. As Bryan Chapell observes: *"Nothing could separate that child from her parent's love — neither tragedy nor disaster, neither the fall nor the flames that followed, neither height nor depth, neither life nor death [itself]"* could separate that child from the love that would do anything required that she might *live*.

Try to take in tonight the reality that you have been loved with a love even greater than that. As you behold this cross and come to this table, take in the fact that YOU are that child and Jesus is that Love that has, humbled itself, stretched out its arms, and WRAPPED you in a final and full security. Let the Holy Spirit at work through me and the people of this community around you help strip off the vestiges of regret and death that don't belong on you anymore. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, your sin, your insufficiency, your mortality has been completely covered, as has mine. In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and freed to walk out from here into a new life (2 Cor 5:17).

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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