

Lesson Sixteen

(John 11:1-44)

Jesus and the apostles received a warm welcome from the disciples of John the Baptist. And another evidence of the success of John's ministry is the crowd's statement that "everything he said about this man was true" (10:41). So many of them readily accepted Jesus as he taught for an unspecified period of time in the Jordan River area.

Meanwhile, back in the village of Bethany, a tense drama is taking place. And it involves some people who are very dear to Jesus.

The Death of Lazarus

(John 11:1-16)

¹A man named Lazarus, who lived in Bethany, became sick. Bethany was the town where Mary and her sister Martha lived. (²This Mary was the one who poured the perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who

was sick.) ³The sisters sent Jesus a message: "Lord, your dear friend is sick."

⁴When Jesus heard it, he said, "The final result of this sickness will not be the death of Lazarus; this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory."

⁵Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶Yet when he received the news that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was for two more days. ⁷Then he said to the disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸"Teacher," the disciples answered, "just a short time ago the people there wanted to stone you; and are you planning to go back?"

⁹Jesus said, "A day has twelve hours, doesn't it? So whoever walks in broad daylight does not stumble, for he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰But if he walks during the night he stumbles, because he has no light." ¹¹Jesus said this and then added, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him up."

¹²The disciples answered, "If he is asleep, Lord, he will get well."

¹³Jesus meant that Lazarus had died, but they thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴So Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵but for your sake I am glad that I was not with him, so that you will believe. Let us go to him."

¹⁶Thomas (called the Twin) said to his fellow disciples, "Let us all go along with the Teacher, so that we may die with him!"

Bethany was a small village located about 1.6 miles from Jerusalem. It was nestled on the Mount of Olives, right on the heavily traveled road leading from Jerusalem to Jericho. Bethany was the place where Jesus lodged during the final week of his earthly ministry, and it was the place from which he left the earth and went back to heaven (Luke 24:50-51).

There are five prominent women named Mary in the New Testament: the mother of Jesus, the sister of Lazarus, the one from Magdala, the wife of Clopas, and the mother of Mark. So here in 11:2 John pauses to distinguish her from the others by reminding his readers that she is the one who later becomes famous for her gracious act in anointing Jesus with her own expensive perfume (see 12:1-8).

So it is this particular Mary who, along with her sister Martha, sends an urgent message to Jesus: "Lord, your dear friend is sick" (11:3). They had probably already secured traditional medical treatment for Lazarus. But his health continued to decline to its

present critical condition. Then it dawned on them that their only hope was to try to get Jesus to come to heal their dying brother.

We are not told who delivered the sisters' message. But John makes it clear that Jesus does not react as one might expect. Instead of breaking camp and hurrying to Bethany, he calmly informs all of them that "the final result" of Lazarus' illness will not be death; rather, "this has happened in order to bring glory to God, and it will be the means by which the Son of God will receive glory" (11:4).

So the apostles, as well as the family and friends of Lazarus, are about to learn a tremendously important lesson: "In all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). The life of Joseph is a good example of this principle. From a purely human viewpoint, his life was just one disaster after another. He had been hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused of attempted rape, and thrown into prison. But there came a time when he could look back and see God's providence at work in his life, even during those difficult times. So to his brothers he said, "Now do not be upset or blame yourselves because you sold me here. It was really God who sent me ahead of you to save people's lives" (Genesis 45:5). Let's try to develop an awareness of God's guidance in our lives, just as he was with people like Joseph and Lazarus.

After two more days (11:6), Jesus instructs his disciples to get ready to go to Bethany. They remind him of the great danger involved (11:8); but he reminds them that when the right time comes to do God's work there is never a reason to delay (10:9-10).

Jesus certainly does not teach the fanciful doctrine of "soul-sleeping" in 11:11, nor is it taught anywhere else in the Bible. When a person dies, he is cut off from participation in the affairs of this world; but he is an active participant in the affairs of the place to which he goes — either to heaven or hell (Luke 16:19-31; 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:21-23; Rev. 7:15-17; 20:4). All that Jesus is saying is that Lazarus has died (11:14), but that he will not remain in that condition.

However, the apostles are so upset at the idea of once again facing the hostile Jewish authorities that they don't pay much attention to Jesus' words. They believe the end is near for Jesus (11:16).

Jesus: The Resurrection and the Life

(John 11:17-27)

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had been buried four days before. ¹⁸Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹and many Judeans had come to see Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother's death.

²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed in the house. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, "If you had been here, Lord, my brother would not have died! ²²But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask him for."

²³"Your brother will rise to life," Jesus told her.

²⁴"I know," she replied, "that he will rise to life on the last day."

²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷"Yes, Lord!" she answered. "I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

The Jewish custom during Jesus' time was to have seven days of public mourning followed by 30 days of private mourning (at least in the case of a close relative). The first three days were called "days of weeping," and according to some rabbis the soul hovered above the body until the body began to decompose after the third day. That may be why John particularly notes that Lazarus had been dead for four days (11:17).

In this brief conversation between Martha and Jesus, she expresses her deep disappointment that he had not come in time to keep Lazarus from dying (11:20-22). Then Jesus gently but firmly leads her from an attitude of self-pity to one of deeper trust in him as the Messiah, the Son of God (11:25-27). And his words continue to bring hope and comfort to all of us who have seen loved ones pass from this life.

Jesus Weeps

(John 11:28-37)

²⁸After Martha said this, she went back and called her sister Mary privately. "The Teacher is here," she told her, "and is asking for you." ²⁹When Mary heard this, she got up and hurried out to meet him. (³⁰Jesus had not yet arrived in the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.) ³¹The people who were in the house with Mary comforting her followed her when they saw her get up and hurry out. They thought that she was going to the grave to weep there.

³²Mary arrived where Jesus was, and as soon as she saw him, she fell at his feet. "Lord," she said, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died!"

³³Jesus saw her weeping, and he saw how the people with her were weeping also; his heart was touched, and he was deeply moved. ⁴³"Where have you buried him?" he asked them.

"Come and see, Lord," they answered.

³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶"See how much he loved him!" the people said.

³⁷But some of them said, "He gave sight to the blind man, didn't he? Could he not have kept Lazarus from dying?"

After Martha had personally received encouragement, she rushes home to share it with Mary and, if possible, to get her to go up the road and meet Jesus. A large group of friends — probably mostly women — are gathered there in the family home, as was the ancient custom. So Martha enters and takes her aside to explain the good news.

And Mary, without bothering to explain where she was going, hurried out the door to find Jesus (11:29). Assuming that she is headed for her brother's tomb to mourn, the crowd follows right behind her. But to their dismay, she doesn't walk toward the tomb at all. However, they soon see the reason for her puzzling action: Jesus.

What a touching scene then takes place! Mary, with hot tears streaming down her cheeks, expresses her own regret that he hadn't come soon enough to keep Lazarus from dying (11:32). It quickly becomes evident to Jesus and his disciples that these sisters, and in fact the whole community, had loved and respected Lazarus very much.

And at this moment great emotional forces are at work in Jesus, for he is "deeply moved." He is moved to see such deep and genuine expressions of heartache. He is vividly reminded of the fact that very shortly he himself will be lying in a dark tomb awaiting his own resurrection. He is moved by the trauma which death often brings to those left behind. And he is moved by the thought of displaying God's might and power by raising Lazarus from the dead.

And so there is a volcano-like eruption of emotions from the depth of Jesus' being. John describes it so simply: "Jesus wept" (11:35). And, yet, what a wonderfully profound truth. Jesus, the divine Son of God, *wept!* Unlike the Greek gods who were unconcerned and unmoved by human problems, Jesus shows us

that God's heart is broken when we are in sorrow. Jesus wept! Praise God!

If we paid more attention to what the Bible teaches about emotional releases we would pay less money to psychiatrists. Crying, contrary to what most of us (particularly men) learn in our society, is not a crime. Crying, that is the release of emotional tensions, is often a healthy and helpful thing. It can be a sign of strength rather than weakness. When Jimmy Carter won his two-year fight for the presidency of the United States, he returned to his home in Plains, Georgia on Nov. 3, 1976. There, surrounded by his relatives and life-long neighbors, he openly wept as he thanked them for their support. The writer of Genesis records seven different times that Joseph, governor of Egypt, wept and for different reasons (Genesis 42-50). More people need to experience the emotional release of weeping (Acts 20:36-38; Rom. 12:15; Luke 19:41-44; Heb. 4:15; 5:7).

Lazarus is Brought to Life

(John 11:38-44)

³⁸Deeply moved once more, Jesus went to the tomb, which was a cave with a stone placed at the entrance. ³⁹"Take the stone away!" Jesus ordered.

Martha, the dead man's sister, answered, "There will be a bad smell, Lord. He has been buried four days!"

⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believed?" ⁴¹They took the stone away. Jesus looked up and said, "I thank you, Father, that you listen to me. ⁴²I know that you always listen to me, but I say this for the sake of the people here, so that they will believe that you sent me." ⁴³After he had said this, he called out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴He came out, his hands and feet wrapped in grave cloths, and with a cloth around his face. "Untie him," Jesus told them, "and let him go."

The prayer of Jesus shows the harmony which exists between God the Father and God the Son. And he speaks aloud in order to impress upon the mourners that what is about to happen right before their eyes is a miracle worked by God through the Son.

And then, in a loud voice, Jesus shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" And he did! The crowd no doubt gasps and steps back in awe and fear as Lazarus somehow leaves the tomb. Why does Jesus specifically call out Lazarus' name? Perhaps the answer is, as someone had said, that if Jesus had not specified which person

was to be raised, then the words "Come out!" would have raised the dead from every grave throughout the whole world!

This is another victory for Jesus and another defeat for Satan. Death is not the "final result" of my life or yours. Death is only a comma — not a period — in the story of our eternal soul.

Thought Stimulators on John 11:1-44

1. Where is Bethany and what events took place there?
2. Why did the disciples try to keep Jesus from going to Bethany?
3. How did Martha describe Jesus (11:27)?
4. Why did Jesus weep?
5. Why do some people (particularly men) try to suppress their emotions?
6. Why did Martha object to opening the tomb?
7. Discuss some difficulty that you have experienced which you now can see was definitely a part of God's plan for you.
8. Discuss the meaning of (and possible applications) Romans 8:28 for us.
9. What should be the Christian's response to the death of a loved one?
10. What does the term "Messiah" mean?
11. What real difference does belief in the resurrection of the dead make in your own life?
12. Few people really have their "house in order" when death comes, and that puts undue pressure upon their family. So take time this week to do the following: (1) Make an appointment with a lawyer in order to draw up a will; and (2) plan out your own funeral arrangements (songs, scriptures, pallbearers, etc.). Then let your family read your plan, or at least let them know where they can find it if something happens to you.