

Into Thy Word Ministries Bible Study www.intothyword.org

General Idea: Jesus' best friend dies! He lived in Bethany and may even have been a family member or a childhood friend of Jesus. He had two sisters who were also dear to Jesus and helped Him throughout His ministry. But, Lazarus gets sick and the sisters send word to Him, but it seems that Jesus does not respond or even care. Even though Martha did Jesus a great humble service and repentance by pouring the expensive perfume on His feet and hosting perhaps many events at her home for Him, there seems to be no reaction from Him; in fact, He seems determined to go further away. It may seem the same to us at times as we cry out to God for help, yet we see no response from Him, at least from our perspective. They told Him *this is the guy, the one you dearly love, come quick*; but Jesus says that his sickness will not kill him, so He continues His work and stays for two more days. After that, He says *I will receive glory from this*, and then sets off to Judea. This perplexed His Disciples, and they said to Him *but Teacher; the Jewish leaders there want you dead. Why are we going there again?* Jesus makes an unusual reply; *there are twelve hours in a day for light, in this we can walk safely. The only danger is in the night, and our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; I will go now and wake Him up.* The Disciples thought Lazarus must have been getting better, but Jesus meant he had died and plainly told them so. Jesus is even glad that Lazarus died because He knows this will increase their faith. Then the Disciples got riled up and said, *let's go and we can die too*, thinking the Pharisees will have them killed too. When they arrive back at Lazarus's home safely, they found that he was indeed dead and had been for four days; he had already been buried too. There were many people there to pay their respects.

Contexts and Background

This passage sets up a series of circumstances that climax Jesus' ministry, power, and purpose. This would be the final showcase of the One True Messiah with an incredible, counterfeit-proof, impossible to duplicate event, the rising of Lazarus from the dead. This gives a verification and validation that Jesus is the Christ, and yet, it will also be used as ammunition against Him and will set the religious leaders on a warpath of rage that will take our Lord's life so we can have life.

Commentary—Word and Phrase Meanings

- *Lazarus.* His name is an abbreviation of *Eleazar*, meaning "one whom God helps." Because of the travel time, he must have died soon after the messengers delivered their news to Jesus. This is not the same poor person seen in Luke who goes to heaven while his rich master goes to hell and asks if Lazarus can quench his thirst. This Lazarus is obviously wealthy because of the magnitude of his household and admirers (Luke 16:19-31).
- *Sick.* In an era where there was no medical intervention, the community banded together and helped with the chores of taking care of an ill person. Giving support by homespun remedies, meals, prayer, and visitation was very important then as it is now in most cultures.
- *Bethany.* This was a small village of inns on the eastern part of the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem where people on their pilgrimages to the feast days and Passover in Jerusalem would stay. This was one of the prime areas of Galilee where Jesus ministered. It is not the same town as named in John 1:28 (Mark 11:1; 14:3; Luke 24:50).
- *Poured perfume.* John is not in chronological order; this story of Mary is told in John 12 and takes place before this event.
- *Sent word.* This was not just a polite note because Jesus was a friend; this was a passionate plea, because they knew Jesus could heal him. Lazarus was about twenty miles away from where Jesus was—a day's walk or more for Jesus to get there.

- *The one you love.* The Greek word “*phileo*,” which means to have a “brotherly love” for others, implies a deep-rooted affection, and is where we get our word for the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia (Matt. 19:19b). This word implies that we go beyond superficial relationships and strive for the deep ones, without being shallow or pretentious (Matt. 5:44). It is also speculated, by the use of language, that he and Jesus may have been childhood friends or had some kind of close relationship prior to Jesus’ ministry. Some liberal redactors say that this is a testimony to Jesus’ homosexuality, because of the phrase, “the one you love,” but in the Greek, the word is “*Phileo*,” meaning deep friendship and care, and in verse five (5), it is “*agape*,” a deep sacrificial love; whereas a homosexual stance would use “*Eros*,” which is not found in the Bible. That word refers to sex and lust, and the intimacy between a husband and wife. The indication is the scholars (redactors) who say they do not know the Greek language or the historical and cultural conditions of the first century (Psalm 23:6; Hosea 1:1; Matt. 5:44; 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; John 3:16; 5:20; 7:38; 13:34-35; 21:15; Rom. 1:31; 12:10; 1 Cor. 13; Eph. 5:33; 1 Thess. 1:3; 2:8; 3:6; 12; 4:9-10; 5:8; 13; 2 Tim. 3:3; 1 John 2:16; 1 John 4: 7-12).
- *Not end in/lead to death.* This does not mean that Lazarus will not die, because he did; rather, it means that death will not triumph (Mark 5:39).
- *God's glory.* God allowed His close friends to go through this suffering and mourning for a greater purpose, a lesson of faith that would resound into eternity. We all go through sorrows and hardships; we may never see the light at the end of the tunnel. However, His Light is always with us, illuminating our path, molding, making, shaping, filling, and using us, if we allow ourselves to learn from it rather than fuss and fret.
- *He stayed/two days longer.* God does not always answer our requests in the timing and manner we would like, because He is still at work in us and in others through us. He wants us to be challenged to learn and grow so we cultivate faith and maturity; the easy life does not allow for such lessons. This would have been a hard sell and may have caused distress and confusion; why wouldn’t Jesus come? Jesus often rebuffs His Disciples and close followers, not to offend or indicate that He does not care—rather, to test faith and teach a greater message they need to hear (John 2:4).
- *Back to Judea.* The disciples knew they would risk their lives and urged Jesus to be careful, lacking the understanding of His purpose and timing or the veracity of His mission. This was the territory of the Pharisees who did not tolerate competition or would-be messiahs and thus wanted Jesus dead. The Disciples were justifiably fearful, yet they also had a willingness to go anyway and trust in Jesus. This act further challenged the religious leaders by showing them justifiable contempt.
- *Twelve hours of daylight.* This has a double meaning: twelve hours was the average portion of time to do work if one did not waste time. It also means allowing God to use you and not to waste your time.
- *Walks by day.* Meaning to be led by God's blessings, to walk with Christ, and have fellowship with Him with our convictions, trust, and obedience (John 8:12).
- *World's light.* Meaning to walk away from Christ, to live our lives by our will and pride, making it *all about me*, my wishes, my desires, centered on my hurts and fears and my ambitions and wants. This way does not leave room for the God of the Universe.
- *Walks by night.* This is a contrast between the light of God's blessings and the darkness that is of evil evading or fighting against God and His principles. This is also a foreshadowing of the sufferings Christ would endure on the cross—consequences for Him and blessings for us (Psalm 27:2; Isa. 59:10; Jer. 13:16; 18:15; 20:11; Mal. 2:8; John 8:12-30; 9:4).
- *Fallen asleep/sleep.* This was a metaphor for death, because the people who are known and loved by God will rise again and thus, there is the hope that they are not permanently departed. The Greeks portrayed death and sleep as the “twin brothers.” This is not teaching the false doctrine of “soul sleep,” when the believer passes away and then goes into a hibernation mode until the fruition of the end

times. A believer will be conscious and responsive after death (1 Sam. 28:3-20; 1 Kings 2:10; Psalm 13:3; Dan. 12:2; Matt. 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30-31; 23:4 Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6,18,20,51; Eph. 5:14; 1 Thess. 4:13).

- *Wake him up.* This sets Jesus up for His greatest miracle (Mark 9:9; 9:10; 12:25; Luke 16:31; 24:46; John 20:9; Acts 10:41; 13:43; 17:3,31).
- *Death.* The cost it would take to give Lazarus his physical life back and for us to have eternal life is the death of our Lord; Jesus' life is given for us to have life.
- *I am glad.* Jesus is not glad we have to go through sufferings, but glad that we have the opportunity to build our faith and be an instrument of praise and blessings to Him and an example to others.
- *You may believe...* that a person will be led from a simplistic belief to a deep-seated conviction of trust that will lead to a transformed life. Who and what Jesus did was not happenstance; it was purposeful and calculated before humanity began. There are no miscalculations or accidents in God's happenings or workings in His mission or His working in our lives (Rom. 12:1-2).
- *Thomas.* He was also called *The Twin*. "Didymus," said he was willing to die for Jesus, yet was famous for doubting Jesus' resurrection (Doubting Thomas), requiring empirical evidence, which he received a week later. It is also thought that he traveled to India (perhaps with Bartholomew) where he was speared to death (Matt. 10:1-4; John 1:38; 20:24-28).
- *Die with him.* Meaning a Jewish profession of faith to be willing to die for God and His Law here given to Jesus as God and Law. The Disciples had misunderstood Jesus, taking what He was saying too literally. However, even though the antagonism has escalated toward Jesus, they did exhibit bravery through their willingness to die with Him. This also means to commit completely what we would call "surrendering to the Lordship of Christ." It is not just to be an emotional or indifferent undertaking; rather, when we follow Jesus, we are His emissaries (Matt. 5:14; 8:18-22; 10:38-39; 2 Cor. 5:20; Gal. 2:20-21; Phil. 2:15; 3:1-14).
- *Tomb for four days.* Meaning he was not mostly dead; he was really and totally dead, not merely ill or in a coma. This is very significant because it was a common belief (not from Scripture) that a person's soul hangs out for three days, just in case the body gets better. Perhaps this came from a lack of understanding of medicine and/or of comas. So, for this to be a major miracle, Jesus had to wait for cultural reasons.
- *Comfort.* Participating in the grief of a person's passing was a major cultural obligation; it showed piety, encouragement, and consolation to the ones left behind and a reminder of how short and futile life can be, so make the most of it. This included helping with meals, chores, and "wailing." To express grief at funerals, families would weep loudly; when they tired out, they hired others to continue on, to pronounce to the community humiliation to show their grief.
- *Loss.* This is also an example to show our guilt for our sins and our need for true repentance, as wailing was the cultural thing to do to prove, by self-humiliation, the mourning of one's sins (Lev. 23:29; 26:41; 2 Kings 22:11; Joel 1:13-14; 2:12-13; James 4:7-10).

Devotional Thoughts and Applications

We all can have a hard time understanding what God is doing. It may seem that He does not care or listen to our plight and plea. This will cause a crisis of faith, a moment of distress. This is OK as long as it does not create a life and attitude of distress, because that would mean we failed the test of faith—that we failed to learn, grow, and trust in our Lord. At some time, we all have been hurt and disillusioned—by our church, a loved one, a coworker, a circumstance, and/or life as a whole. I am going through this now. I find myself without a flock to pastor, trying to cool off my burned feathers (so to speak) from my last

pastorate. My point is, we need one another and we need the church even though it's people hurt us because, like a piece of coal taken from the fireplace, it will only burn for a few minutes by itself and be very dim, but in the fireplace, next to many other pieces of coal, it can burn bright. Our focus needs to be on Christ—not on His dysfunctional people or on the world, So, my point is this: let's keep committed and let's focus better so we all can be better together!

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see Inductive Bible Study):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. Have you ever had a crisis of faith, a moment of distress? What happened? What did God do? What did you learn? How are you now?
2. Why do you suppose Jesus did not show a reaction, and actually went further away?
3. Have you ever felt at times that God seems not to care? Have you ever cried out to God for help, and received no response? How did you feel? What did you learn?
4. How do you feel that God does not always answer our requests in the timing and manner we would like?
5. How do you feel when you go through sorrows and hardships? How do you feel that Christ is illuminating your path, molding, making, shaping, filling, and using you in these dark times?
6. How can you better allow yourself to learn from dark times and not fuss and fret?
7. What can you do to grow beyond superficial relationships and strive for the deep ones without being shallow or pretentious?
8. What does God want you to do? What do you need to do to have more belief in Christ so to allow Him to take control of your will and plans? What would your life look like then?
9. How do you feel that when you are in Christ, you have God's blessings of walking with Him and having fellowship with Him? What do your convictions, trust, and obedience say about you?
10. What happens when pastors do not exercise wisdom or godly leadership? What happens when church leaders are motivated by their own wishes, desires, or are centered on hurts and fears or ambitions and wants? What can your church do to lead its people better?
11. What can you do to be a person who pledges and commits completely what we would call "surrender to the Lordship of Christ," not just an emotional or indifferent endeavor?
12. What can you do better to follow Jesus so you can better reflect His light, and thus be His ambassador of light to the world? How can you and your church do this better?