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The Raising of Lazarus and God's Timing

For nothing is impossible with God

—Luke 1:37

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!

—Mark 9:24b

Read: John 11

Purpose

In the seventh and last of the Apostle John's recorded miracles, he describes the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In the beginning of his narrative, John tells us that after Jesus heard about Lazarus' illness, He waited *two more days* before starting out for Bethany – the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. This chapter will delve into the contextual significance of **when** Jesus deliberately chose to raise Lazarus and **why** it was on the **fourth day**.



Sending a Message

As the book of John unfolds, in the eleventh chapter we learn that Lazarus has fallen ill. Apparently Lazarus' condition worsened enough that Mary and Martha felt the urgent need to contact Jesus about his rapidly deteriorating state. Interestingly, Mary and Martha also felt the need to remind Jesus in their message of His love for their brother Lazarus. In doing so, they indicate an expectation that 1) Jesus could make a difference in Lazarus' condition, and 2) Jesus would respond. So the sisters found a messenger, entrusted him with their "come and help" message, and sent him on his two-day journey to an area east of the Jordan where Jesus was spending the late winter.¹

The Response

When the messenger delivers the sisters' message,² Jesus immediately sends a message back to the sisters to reassure them: *This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that His Son may be glorified through it.*³ We need to remember that in the Hebrew way of understanding things, God is glorified when He is accurately revealed for "who He is and

how He does things,” that oft-used phrase of Dr. James Martin, Preserving Bible Times’ Co-Founder.

Deliberate “Delay”

John reminds us that Jesus loved this brother and sister threesome⁴ and then surprises us by telling us something that seems inconsistent with His affection for these good friends. John informs us that after learning of the sisters’ “please come” request, Jesus *stayed where He was two more days*.⁵

Is this how you would respond to a message that a dear friend of yours is seriously ill and rapidly deteriorating? Would you wait two more days before leaving to see him or her in the hospital? Before answering, remember that Jesus’ timing is always purposeful and impeccably appropriate. So what are we to make of this two-day “delay”? Let’s look more closely at the clues John gives us.

Reassurance

John has already told us that Jesus loves Mary, Martha and Lazarus. So this deliberate two-day “delay” is certainly not because He doesn’t love them. Furthermore, Jesus has already reassured the sisters with a message that this is not a sickness that will end in death – Lazarus will not die from this illness. How did the sisters receive and understand that return message on the second day after Lazarus died? Did they believe it – even into the fourth day? Or might that message have been perplexingly received as too little, too late?

Note that when Jesus summarizes Lazarus’ condition for His disciples, He tells them that Lazarus *has fallen asleep*.⁶ In using this verb tense, John is informing us that Lazarus died before the messenger found Jesus. Jesus also used the word *asleep* to characterize the state of Jarius’

just-expired 12-year old daughter.⁷ Remember also that Jesus brought back to life the only son of the widow of Nain.⁸ Given the inevitable notoriety of these two raisings, it is highly likely that Mary and Martha were very much aware of these two remarkable bringing-back-to-life **same-day** miracles (neither body had yet been placed in a tomb before the end of the day of death, something this culture required then and still does today).

Same-Day Faith

Now that Lazarus is dead, according to Mary and Martha’s “faith system,” Jesus could still make a difference only (perhaps) if He got to Bethany before the end of the day that Lazarus died. Yet as that day of death ends, Jesus is not there and no message has been received from Him.

When Jesus finally leaves the Transjordan area and arrives in Bethany after a two-day journey, John purposely tells us that Lazarus has been dead **four days**.⁹ A deeper contextual understanding of this passage hinges on comprehending the Hebrew worldview of death and the significance of the fourth day.

Officially Impossible

The Mishnah seems to suggest evidence of a rabbinic belief that the soul (*nephesh* in Hebrew) hovered near the corpse of the dead person for three days hoping to be able to re-enter the body.¹⁰ But by the fourth day there began a process of (smelly) decomposition that prompts the soul to depart. Thus, if we had a Richter scale (1-10) of Miracles like we do for earthquakes, bringing someone back to life on the day of death – like Jarius’ daughter and the widow of Nain’s son – might be a 9.9 reading. But bringing someone back to life on the **fourth**

day would be off the scale, unthinkable, a virtual impossibility!

A Contemporary Analogy

By way of a 21st century analogy, envision that Lazarus' body, after lying in repose for three days of viewing at a Bethany funeral home, is cremated (in this contemporary analogy) at the beginning of the fourth day. Several hours later as Lazarus' ashes are about to be raked from the floor of the now-cooled cremation chamber, Jesus stops by. After opening the door of the furnace chamber, Jesus peers in and sees the small pile of Lazarus' remains on the chamber floor, pauses, and with tears flowing down His cheeks, begins praying to His Father. After praying, Jesus authoritatively says, *Lazarus, come out*. Miraculously, an able-bodied Lazarus suddenly emerges from the ashes and is helped out of the cremation chamber! That is the analogous 21st century contextual significance to a first-century observant Jew of someone being raised on the fourth day!

Meanwhile Back at Temple, Inc.

The full weight of Jesus' incredulous raising of Lazarus on the fourth day was not lost on the Temple's "Board of Directors." This ruling elite saw the miracle for exactly what it was – an extraordinary event that only God could do. Caiaphas, the High Priest that year, immediately recognized the implications of this unimaginable outcome: *If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place (Temple) and our nation.*¹¹

The Temple Aristocracy was preoccupied with maintaining their religious power and preserving this incredible cash flow generating institution. In their worldview, if Messiah really

did come He would politically and militarily rule the nation from His throne in the Temple. When that happened, their oversight of this "cash cow" enterprise would suddenly cease. Even if Jesus was the Messiah, their hearts were so hardened that they would never submit to Him. So the Temple "Board" took Caiaphas' advice, and decided to kill Jesus.¹²

All Part of the Plan

The raising of Lazarus, and deliberately waiting until the fourth day to publicly do it, "sealed the deal" for Jesus. The Sanhedrin saw and heard enough! They were now committed to finding a way to kill Him. Achieving that outcome was all part of Jesus' purpose in waiting two more days before returning to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead. It was all part of God's plan to reveal the full **fourth-day** extent of His glory as well as pointing forward to the Cross and the upcoming glory of the empty tomb.

Observations

It is worth reflecting on Jesus' deliberate two-day "delay" and some of the implications of God's timing for disciples today:

- **God's Glory** In raising Lazarus on the fourth day, God was indeed glorified (accurately revealed) as the One who transcends death – the doer of the "impossible." Jesus was also accurately revealed as *the resurrection and the life*.
- **Providence can Perplex** Note that being loved by Jesus and being part of God's plan to manifest His glory does not shield us from disappointments, difficult times, crises or even "catastrophes." As we live our lives out in the perfection of God's providence, the focus needs to always be first and foremost on Him and His glory, not on our self-absorbed

notions of what seems best for us. Seeing, understanding, and then embracing this spiritual reality can be a struggle. The increasing spiritual narcissism of Western evangelicalism, e.g., **my** gifts, **my** ministry, **my** calling, **my** blessings, **my** leading someone to Jesus, even **my** Jesus, can so easily view being a disciple of Jesus as far too much about me than about Him. It's as if "discipleship" is first and foremost about my personal search for self-fulfillment, and not for His glory.

- **Consequences** It goes without saying that this deliberate two-day "delay" did not spare Mary and Martha anxiety about their brother's deteriorating condition, nor grief when he died. Note also that being brought back to life did not necessarily make Lazarus' life easier. He became a hunted man. His face was now on the Jerusalem area "wanted" posters along with Jesus. He was now a living Exhibit "A" that a messianic miracle had occurred. In the eyes of the Temple authorities, Jesus and Exhibit "A" Lazarus both needed to be removed.¹³
- **Expectations** When we define our expectations, we usually set the stage for our disappointments. Life seldom turns out the way we hoped or dreamed it would – witness Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth's (John the Baptist's mother) 40 years of barrenness. In walking faithfully, we are to avoid any sense of *rigid expectations* of what God should do for us, as well as setting (usually self-serving) timetables and deadlines for when He needs to do it.

We are called to live each day in God's providence with a *sense of expectancy* that our utterly good and faithful God and Father will surprise us, often at the most unexpected time(s). As the Apostle Paul reminds us in his benediction to the Ephesians: *He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us...*¹⁴

- **Faith** These fourth-day "crisis" events also serve as barometers of our faith. Mary and Martha received the message that Lazarus would not die on the second day after he died. What did they make of that? Giving Mary and Martha the benefit of the doubt, we could credit them with an it-still-is-possible-Lazarus-can-be-brought-back-to-life faith that stretched through the first three days. But now it is the fourth day! In their view, Lazarus' soul is gone! Being brought back to life by Jesus is now officially impossible! According to their understanding, the decomposition process and resultant stench is already underway.¹⁵ John indicates that the sisters' faith did not extend to the fourth day which was underscored by Jesus' question: *Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*¹⁶ Mary and Martha will now find out, just like Mary and Elizabeth did in Luke 1, that "*nothing is impossible for God.*"¹⁷ How heartening it is to realize that God's faithfulness to us continues even when our faith in Him runs out!

Ponder

This case history of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, real people dealing with the real circumstances of life, reminds us that we need to be extremely cautious when reacting to situations that don't seem to be working out according to our desired timetables. Whether it relates to a single person long awaiting for a spouse, a childless couple laboring through the frustrations of infertility, an unemployed person still anxiously waiting for a new job, we all seem to have our own implicit endpoints for these “delays” when our souls want to cry out to God, “Enough is enough!”

We are usually willing to accommodate, or even tolerate some “delay” in God's timing, as long as it seems to be a reasonable period of time (as defined by us). We are even good at rationalizing these kinds of delays and even assigning to them a redemptive faith-building quality because we want these waiting times to make sense. But what happens when our fourth-day arrives? When none of it makes sense anymore? When our situation now seems to be somewhere between utterly bleak and totally hopeless?

During those “desperate” times, we need to be very careful about drawing any lines in the sand with respect to God's timing and our willingness to accept it. If we do, we might well be instigating our own crisis of faith. We always have a choice in how we decide to respond to the “adversity” in our lives. A seasoned faith in God

chooses to respond by intentionally resting the purpose and meaning of our lives in the perfection of His all wise, all knowing, all loving nature and timing.

One of the many dividends of heaven will be that not only will all of the “why” questions of our lives be answered, but God's purpose in them will become praise-worthy clear. Not only will we then see all the events of our lives through the rear view mirror of the impeccable providence of God's Sovereignty, but we will also eternally rejoice in them. We will celebrate God's timing because we will then fully see how all those deliberate “delays” and waiting periods in our lives served to reveal His glory to others. In fact, **God Ordained “Delay”** is an essential part of every disciple's faith-building journey. The acrostic of **GOD** can remind us of that!

A Post Script

The issue we always have to wrestle with is whether these “delays” are God ordained or whether they are simply self-inflicted wounds stemming from the actions and decisions that flow out of our own fallenness. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were centered in God's will with respect to their circumstances. In some of the train wrecks and derailments in my own life, it needs to be said that they were caused not by God but because I wasn't even trying to be centered in God's will doing what He wanted done.

*All the days ordained for me were written
in your book before one of them came to be.*

—**Psalm 139:16b**

I have lived, seen God's hand through a lifetime, and all was for the best.

—**Robert Browning**

The longer I live, the more faith I have in providence,
and the less faith in my interpretation of providence.

—**Jeremiah Day**

God’s providence is like the Hebrew Bible; we must begin
at the end and read backward in order to understand it.

—**A. J. Gordon**

Providence is much more about God’s glory than about our happiness.

—**Geoff Grogan**

If our circumstances find us in God, we shall find God in our circumstances.

—**George Muller**

God is to be trusted when His providences seem to run contrary to His promises.
It is a sin as much to quarrel with God’s providence as to deny His providence.

—**Thomas Watson**

Believe your beliefs and doubt your doubts; do not make
the mistake of doubting your beliefs and believing your doubts.

—**Charles F. Deems**

Visual Resources

For some wonderful contextual visuals that help make the raising of Lazarus come alive, see the collection of “Facing the Cross” images in Preserving Bible Time’s Overview of the Gospels DVD, particularly the “Jericho to Bethany” section including the “Raising of Lazarus” reconstruction.

Notes and Sources

¹John 10:40; see also Matthew 19:1

²John 11:3

³John 11:4

⁴John 11:5

⁵John 11:6

⁶John 11:11

⁷Luke 8:52

⁸Luke 7:15

⁹John 11:17

¹⁰Leviticus Rabbah 18:1 and Yevamot 16:3

¹¹John 11:48-53

¹²John 11:50

¹³John 12:10

¹⁴Ephesians 3:20-21

¹⁵John 11:39

¹⁶John 11:40

¹⁷Luke 1:37