

THE LAZARUS EVENT

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Death is an intriguing subject garnished recently with many books dealing with supposed life-after-death experiences. Questions abound concerning this subject and many are the “authorities” with the answers. All too often these answers do not seem to correspond to Christ’s teaching about death but lend themselves to mysticism and the occult. The death and resurrection of Lazarus supply some interesting facts that do not correspond with these “authorities”.

Not a few funeral services today are called celebrations. These are attempts to bring joy and rejoicing to spouses, children, relatives and friends. Death is portrayed as a friend allowing entrance of the dead person into a better existence. Mourning is seen as almost uncalled for because the deceased loved one is described as having “crossed the river” or as “having passed through the veil” and “more alive than ever”. Any such statements are significantly absent in Jesus’ remarks to Martha and Mary concerning their brother’s death.

These clichés may be absent from our Lord’s conversation because He realized there were no easy solutions to the natural sorrow that follows death. The Holy Spirit-inspired Paul did not write to say that we should not sorrow because of death but that the sorrow and mourning was not to be without hope (I Thess. 4:13). Maybe Jesus did not use these phrases because He also knew they were not true. Jesus knew that in death the person was no longer alive but that the spirit had returned to God who gave it. He knew that the dust of the ground and the breath of life that had made that person a being were torn apart in death.

Unlike many today, Jesus did not teach that man has an immortal soul that continues to live after death but instead taught that immortality is conditioned upon faith in Christ and a gift to be received at the resurrection at the last day (I Cor. 15:20–23, 52–53). Jesus knew that sorrow was natural and its only cure was the hope of the resurrection.

Well worth noting is Martha’s reaction to her brother’s death. Contrary to a common feeling, she does not suggest that because her brother is better off in a new life she is selfish to want him back. Instead her hope is fixed on the only true comfort there is in death — the resurrection (vs. 24). She is also aware that this resurrection will be “at the last day”. Martha’s hope was based on God’s promise that the righteous would be raised to immortality, not on the false concept that her brother was already enjoying the fruits of his labor.

Jesus’ own statements about death and resurrection are far different than present theories or false concepts. In John 11:25 and 26 Jesus affirms that He is the resurrection. Marvin Vincent in his “Word Studies in the New Testament” states, “The words ‘I am’ are every significant. Martha had stated the resurrection rather as a doctrine, a current

tenet: Jesus states it as a fact, identified with His own person. He does not say, I raise the dead; I perform the resurrection, but **I am** the resurrection.” Jesus continues by saying, “He that believes on me, though he die, yet shall he live.”

This was not the only time Jesus had talked of the future resurrection of the dead. In John 6:39–40, Jesus states that God’s will is that Christ should not lose anything that had been given to Him but that He, “should raise it up at the last day.” Jesus repeats this in verse 40 to add emphasis, saying that all who “believe on him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.” The hope of those who have died is for a future resurrection and not an immediate realization. In John 11:26 the same thought is continued when Jesus says “and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die.” A.T. Robertson writes in “Word Pictures in the New Testament” that this means, “shall not die forever.” In other words death is not the end for the saint, for he shall be resurrected from death to immortality, life everlasting.

Jesus had allowed Lazarus to die so that His power and glory might be displayed. John 11:39–44 brings us to the grave and reality of death. Lazarus had been there four days and his body has started to decompose. Only God would be able to restore Lazarus to wholeness. Jesus demonstrates His ability to carry out God’s will already mentioned, “That he should not lose anything,” by raising Lazarus from the dead. Here Jesus not only demonstrates His power to raise the dead but also gives us a preview of the resurrection: a resurrection of body and spirit reunited into a living soul. Here in an imperfect demonstration (for Lazarus did not receive immortality) and later in the perfect demonstration of Christ’s own resurrection we see the real hope and purpose of God — the righteous raised by the power of God to live forever. Death is our enemy but resurrection through the work of Christ is the remedy to the problem. Those that die believing shall live at the resurrection at the last day.

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