

## **Wasted? The radical values of Jesus** **“A waste of effort?”**

Passages: John 11:38–44  
James 5:13–16

There is no doubt that this miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead was an awesome deed! It was so awesome, in fact, that John listed it as the seventh and final miracle of his Gospel. In John’s mind, it was the pinnacle of all Jesus’ miracles; the clearest sign of His divinity and the most visible proof of His glory! Can you remember back in the first chapter of John’s Gospel; how we were told that, at the beginning of time, the Word of God spoke **life** into all creation? Well, in this 11<sup>th</sup> chapter, in this seventh and last sign, John wants us to know that this same Word of God has now come in the flesh to speak **life** into a man who has been dead for four days! This truly is an awesome and inspiring story!

**And yet**, as I read this miracle over and over again, it makes me wonder if, perhaps, we’re missing something! I mean, was the raising of Lazarus just another “Hoorah for Jesus!” story designed to make us feel awestruck by Jesus’ power and glory? Is this really all that John had in mind when he listed it in such a prominent and symbolic position as the 7<sup>th</sup> miracle?

I ask this question because, although it is a mind–blowing story, the fact is that (sooner or later) Lazarus would still have to die **again**; and Mary and Martha would still have to go through their grief **again**; and the mourners would have to put their black clothes back on **again**; and the grave–diggers would have to be hired **again**! Despite this being greatest of Jesus’ miracle (the seventh!), death would inevitably win! After all, everyone dies!

Indeed, like all of Jesus’ miracles, **this miracle would only be temporary**! Think about it: Did the wedding banquet where Jesus turned water into wine come to an end? Of course it did! Did the 5000 who Jesus fed in the wilderness get hungry again? Did those who were saved in the storm encounter other storms? Did those

whom Jesus healed ever get sick again? And would Lazarus, who was so spectacularly restored to life after 4 days of rotting in the grave, have to die again? Of course he would! (In fact, in one of the greatest twists of irony, it was this very miracle that caused the Chief Priests to launch a death-threat against Lazarus! See John 12:10)

Now, surely, when you think about it in this way, it makes you wonder— **What was the point of raising Lazarus from the dead? Wasn't it simply a postponement of the inevitable? Couldn't we even say that it was a bit of a waste of effort on Jesus' part?**

Chew on that a bit while I pray!

I think that the significance of this 7<sup>th</sup> miracle can only become evident by spending some time trying to theologically understand **what death really is.**

You see, Biblically speaking, death is simply the absence of life; the loss of the life we all once had. For, you see, there was no death in the original creation—only life; a life drawn from God! And so, death only came into existence at the Fall, after God had warned Adam, saying: **“The day you eat of the fruit of the tree, you will surely die!”**. In other words, death was the consequence of humankind's search for independence from God (...otherwise known as sin). From the moment that Adam and Eve chose their way over God's way, they began to experience a weakening of their bodies. As they began to lose connection with the God of life...the God who lives forever..., they began to lose life! They began to **die**.

Indeed, the fact is that death is now constantly happening all around us; and not only all around us, but to us and in us as well! Here's a simple fact you may not know: Over the course of seven years or so, every cell in our body dies! Of course, while we are

still young, new cells are created and take the place of the dying ones! But with age, fewer and fewer new cells are created to take the place of the dying ones. And that's why, as we age, our muscles get weaker, our skin gets thinner, our bones get frailer, and our hair turns grey. **We are dying!**

So, what does this mean theologically? Basically, it means that **death is an enemy intruder**, come to steal God's good gift of life from us! And it's just this idea that helps to make sense of verses 33 and 38 in today's passage. In verse 33, we're told in the NIV that Jesus "...**was deeply moved in spirit and troubled**". Now, that translation is far too weak! The Greek word used here is the same word used to describe the snorting of an outraged animal. In humans, it refers to a deep anger! In other words, Jesus "**got furious in His spirit**". And what caused His anger? Clearly, it was the **death of his friend**, as well as all the pain and sadness that Lazarus' death has caused. This same idea comes up again in verse 38. As Jesus comes to the tomb, He is in a state of intense anger, ready to do battle with the enemy.

Indeed, it is exactly here, in the midst of Jesus' anger, that I can finally begin to make sense of this miracle. Although the raising of Lazarus from death is only a **temporary** remedy, I can begin to see a glimpse of the Father's greater plan to **permanently** reverse all the effects of sin, and darkness, and death that have been unleashed in this world since the Fall.

As I said, Lazarus' resuscitation (not resurrection!) is the **seventh miracle** in John's Gospel. It's meant to parallel **the seventh day of the week**, not only marking the end of one week, but also indicating that a new week is yet to come. In this way, **the miracle of Lazarus points us in two directions:**

First, it points back to the week which is almost over-- a very long week, I might add; one that began at the Fall. In this past week, the destructive forces of suffering and death have spread over all the earth. In this past week, there has been a growing link between fear and death as people lose all hope for a solution. In this past week, we also see God's anger mounting against the

forces of death...and it is this anger which prompts Him to come down from heaven in the form of a man. And so, when Jesus Christ comes to the tomb of His friend, Lazarus, and temporarily raises him from the dead, the high point of this week has come! God is finally indicating that He has a plan to destroy the power of death.

And that's why this miracle not only points back—it also points ahead to a better future. Although Lazarus' resuscitation is in the first week (and is thus connected to the Fall), it also serves to point ahead to a brand new week that is just around the corner! The 8<sup>th</sup> day is coming and, with it, will come the dawn of Easter morning! The resurrection of Jesus from the dead will be the greatest of all miracles for it will be the miracle of God's **permanent** victory over death and the start of a whole new life for His people. From that day on, Jesus will lead the way... “the firstfruits of them that slept”! In His resurrection, the Father will permanently take the sting out of death!

Once you understand the two-folded nature of this truth, you will see why Jesus told His disciples that Lazarus was only “**sleeping**”, and that He was going to “**wake him up.**” It is also in this light that Jesus tells Mary and Martha that He is “**the resurrection and the life**”, and that “**all who believe in Me will never die!**” These words would seem incredibly bizarre and naïve if Jesus was only thinking about Lazarus' temporary resuscitation, for they are actually untrue! (Although Lazarus was raised, he did die again!) But they make perfect sense in the light of Jesus' permanent resurrection from the dead and the **power of His resurrection** that will eventually transform the entire world!

Now, let's take a moment to reflect on how this story reveals Jesus value-system. As we've been saying throughout this sermon series, if we call ourselves Jesus' followers and disciples, the value-system that Jesus lived by must become our value-system. The things Jesus treasured, we must treasure, and the things He regarded as unimportant in life must be the things we regard as unimportant.

So, what do we see in today's story? Well, the two most obvious values that I see in Jesus' life are (1) His anger and (2) His love!

On His way to, and then standing in front, the tomb, Jesus' anger burned with a ferocity rarely seen in the Gospels! It burned against death. Indeed, it burned against everything that promotes death in our world—things like injustice, poverty, the abuse of power, the damage done to children. Jesus got angry against all the forces of darkness that are gradually leading the human race to death... death by a thousand cuts!

Have you felt this same anger? I have! I've felt it against abusive husbands and fathers whose repeated violence has their wives to run away with the children with absolutely no support, no money, no home. Beautiful children, with so much to live for, are now frightened and made to feel insecure. That makes me angry!

I've also felt that anger when, after a lovely church service upstairs, I go down to my office to discover that someone has snuck in and stolen things. I'm angry because the joy of our community is immediately broken by the death of distrust and suspicion. I get angry!

I've also felt this anger when confronted by a friend who has cancer and has gone through numerous treatments with only limited relief and little hope. I get angry at the way death creeps in and steals our friends and family from us.

I know many people who've gotten angry with God over these things...but that anger is totally misplaced! God didn't create the world with sin and death already in it. He created it pristine and perfect...full of life and health, innocence and community. His life was radiating through all things. No, it was the human race who chose to turn away from His life; and now we are reaping the consequences of death. We are to blame!

Thankfully, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, we see the beginnings of God's plan to resurrect the entire universe

and restore it to the way it was always meant to be. God is merciful! So, until the time of resurrection fully comes, **get angry** against the destructive forces of sin and death! Display the value-system of Jesus and get angry with God, not against Him!

Indeed, that's why James commands us to pray...to pray for the sick and the lonely and the outcast and the poor. Pray, because that's the way we align ourselves with God's agenda. In prayer, we learn to get angry against the things that God hates, standing with Him as He reverses the tide of evil and death through His Son! In prayer we also learn to be compassionate for the victims of evil and death.

And this leads us to the second value that Jesus displayed-- His **compassionate love**. When Jesus came to Lazarus' tomb, we're told that **He wept**. It's the shortest verse in the whole Bible, but it's filled with insight into the way Jesus understood life. For He saw Lazarus as a victim of the Fall. Indeed, to some degree, Jesus sees every human being as a victim. That's why He cries over us all; weeping over all the disastrous consequences that our sins have wreaked on the human race.

Do we share His tears? Do we feel His pain for a fallen world? When was the last time you got involved in the pain of this fallen world? Paul commands us to weep with those who weep and to mourn with those who mourn! We are called to feel the pain of God as He weeps over the victims of sin and death!

There's a third value that comes through in this story. Although Jesus is faced with His dear friend's death, He shows no fear! I mean, why else would He have waited an extra two days before coming to Lazarus aid? He clearly felt no pressure! He didn't panic, as if death was going to control the situation. Instead, He took His time. He didn't let death call the shots!

Some may have thought that, by not rushing to Bethany, Jesus was being lazy...or neglectful...or unconcerned. Some may have even thought that He was afraid of His own death! Not at all! For

Jesus obviously knew that **death is not an ultimate state of existence**. You see, once our life is over...after we have lived our “3 score years and ten”... our bodies simply return to the dust from where they came! That’s what the Bible says—Ashes to ashes, dust to dust! So, in the end, nothing is lost through death! **God takes back the life He gave to us and the ground takes back the dust it gave to us.** There is nothing to be afraid of... particularly when you have a personal relationship with the Life-giver!

And so, if you think about death in this way, you’ll never fear it! For, in actual fact, the Bible says that the fear of death is just another deceit of the devil! Hebrews 2:14 tells us that this is why Jesus came—to relieve us of our fears! **“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—<sup>15</sup> and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”** Jesus came to prove that death has no sting! There’s really nothing to fear!

That’s why, all throughout His life, Jesus refused to be dictated to by the fear of death! He went where His Father directed Him to go; He did what His Father directed Him to do! He never changed course or slowed down for fear that He might die! Even in today’s story, the forces against Jesus were gathering to plot to have Him killed. Still, He went to his friend’s grave and did what His Father had instructed Him to do.

More than that, Jesus called His disciples to join Him...to come to the tomb without fear and **unbind the risen body of Lazarus**. Clearly, Jesus was telling them not to fear death...not to fear the stench of decay... but to literally expose and repeal death effects in the world!

Of course, only a few weeks later, they would join Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would fearlessly pray, **“Father, not my will, but Yours be done!”**

Are you afraid of death? If you are, you will never be free to launch yourself into the ministry that God is calling you to! You will always hold back, afraid of the consequences...fearful of being harmed. You will always worry and wonder, and search for alternative plans that look far safer. As Hebrews 2:14 says, the fear of death is a form of bondage to the devil! You'll never be able to say, with Jesus, **“Father, not my will, but Yours be done!”**

In the end, here's the question we all need to answer: **Do we really share the value-system of Jesus? Do we share in His anger against the forces of sin and death in this world; His compassion for the victims of sin and death; and His fearless attitude to death?**

Or was the raising of Lazarus from the dead nothing but a **waste of effort?**

**Let's pray.**