

POWER OVER DEATH - JOHN 11:17-44

Without doubt, those last days during the month of May in 1878 were the most difficult days of John's life. On the 20th of May, his dearest friend, Augustus Devin, had died of tuberculosis. Now just 5 days later, his 73 year old father had passed away unexpectedly. And so here was John on May 29th, standing quietly in a cemetery in North Bend, Ohio, at his father's memorial service, really grieving the loss of 2 who had been very close to him. It was after the service had concluded that John's brother Ben grabbed his arm. "Come with me" he said tensely. Ben led John a short ways to the graveside of their friend, Augustus. "Look what's happened!" John looked in amazement. Augustus Devin's grave had been robbed. Now this simple fact alone did not surprise John, for grave robbing was perhaps the most common crime in Ohio in the 1870's. The medical schools were continuously looking for human bodies for dissection and research, and many disrespectful profiteers were only too willing to provide them for a fee. But in the midst of John's grief, this was just too much for him to bear. If he had to turn every medical school upside down, he would find the body of his friend and return it to its rightful resting place. It took 2 days, but John finally obtained his search warrant. And he began with the Ohio Medical College in Cincinnati. The administrators were very reticent to let John in, and they stalled profusely, but they couldn't refuse him for he had a court order. Their reluctance only proved their guilt, John thought. As he searched the main building, he finally came upon a room which had a deceased body on a table in it. "This corpse is not your friend," the administrators insisted. But John would have to find out for sure himself. And

so with trembling hand, John reached out and removed the linen cloth from the face of the body. It was not John's friend, Augustus Devin. It was John's father, the senior John Scott Harrison.

That event changed laws concerning the treatment of the deceased in Ohio. Public outcry demanded greater respect for those who had passed away. For you see, John's father, the senior John Scott Harrison, remains to this day as a distinct man in the history of our country. He is the only man who is both the son of one U.S. President and the father of another.

Today, grave sites are considered to be honored places. There are laws to protect graves against abuse. And that is the way it should be, for in honoring the grave site, we are in reality honoring the life which it represents.

But we are not alone in this attitude, for down through the annals of human history, civilized people have always respected the tombs of their loved ones. The ancient Jews certainly had great reverence for their sepulchers. They respected people as being created in the image and likeness of God, and, therefore, extended that attitude towards their final resting places.

And so it does not surprise us to see great hesitation when Jesus spoke of disturbing Lazarus' tomb, for this was something that just was not done. Lazarus had been dead for 4 days. His body had begun to decompose. Certainly, he should be left alone out of respect for the dead. Little did they realize the goal that Jesus had in mind, for his purpose was not to disturb the tomb of the dead, but rather it was to restore life so that there would not be any tomb to disturb. And this great miracle, commonly recognized to be the climax of Jesus' public ministry,

was the one which John chose as the last of his seven. We have already seen John's purpose in choosing 7 miracles to include in his gospel account – READ John 20:30,31.

JN 20:30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

*7 miracles each designed to promote belief that Jesus was the Christ, the son of God, and through that belief eternal life in his name.

And in this final miracle, we have one of the most powerful statements of Christ claiming to be the resurrection and the life.

This miracle falls into 3 major sections.

1. We first have the confused commotion that surrounded Lazarus' death.

Funerals always intrude into our schedules, don't they? Seldom does one plan for a funeral. Death occurs suddenly, and it is almost always unexpected. Even when an enduring physical illness takes a life, even when someone who is very elderly passes away, even when the doctor has told us that there just isn't much hope, death still comes as a shock.

And certainly this was the case with Lazarus- a relatively young man, in good health and strength, very active in the community- then suddenly, he was gone. And his death plunged the household into confusion. Planned Schedules had to be dropped, and funeral arrangements made.

It is very clear that Jesus and his disciples walked into this disrupted setting

when they came to this home.

Martha and Mary are obviously in great grief. And in their grief they question. *Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* (11:21) Mary also has the same response. *When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* (11:32) It is even interesting to note that those visiting the family - probably many unbelieving at this time who had come from the surrounding community- had a very similar response. *But some of them said, Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?* (11:37)

Now these statements in part stem from the fact that word had been sent from Lazarus' household when Lazarus had become seriously ill, but Jesus had intentionally delayed his coming. *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was 2 more days.* (11:5,6) Now we know the reason for this very clearly from the context. Jesus could not have arrived before Lazarus died- for Lazarus had been dead for 4 days when Jesus got there. So Jesus was going to have to raise him from the dead if Lazarus was to live. And Jesus wanted there to be no doubt about this miracle for the purpose of it was to prove his divine power and Messiahship. *This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's son may be glorified through it.* (11:4) You see, Christ had raised the dead before. He had raised Jairus' daughter and the son of a widow who lived in Nain. But both of these resurrections were private and both occurred immediately after death. So scoffers

probably assumed that the young daughter and son had never really been dead in the first place. Jesus planned for this resurrection, coming at the pinnacle of his ministry to be a very public one. If he would have raised Lazarus immediately after death, it would have not been as impressive to unbelievers, for according to Jewish tradition a person's spirit floated around the deceased body for 4 days hoping to gain reentry. On the fourth day, when the body began to decompose, it was believed that the spirit recognized that this was no longer the same person, so the spirit would depart. Now we know that this is not a true belief, but it was accepted Jewish tradition by many in the first century. So Christ wanted to delay long enough so that there would be no question that this raising was a divine action.

But to Martha, and Mary and the Jews, Christ's delaying must have seemed strange. So they were confused. The household was confused by the passing of a loved one throwing everyone into emotional turmoil. The setting was confused with mourners milling all about. And minds were confused as both the loved ones and visiting friends were wondering "why?" Why did this happen to such a fine young man? Why didn't Jesus come earlier to help? And Jesus even weeps as he sees the consequences of death and the agony that it brings.

It is so difficult to trust in God's timing as well as his power. But the miracle was all the more glorious, and the purpose of the miracle to bring glory to God was more powerful because of the wait. Christ came to the home of Martha and Mary to bring order out of the confusion. God is a God of order, and he delights

in bringing order out of confusion in the lives of people. So it was with Jesus Christ, as he walked into this confused commotion. He came to bring order out of confusion- and that is exactly what he did.

2. We come now to the second part of this miracle featuring the confident command of Christ. READ 11:38-44.

JN 11:38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

JN 11:40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

JN 11:41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

JN 11:43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Now there are many interesting features to this miracle that are brought out by the apostle John. We just have time, of course, to look at a few of these. One of the immediately striking observations is the inconsistency in Martha's thinking brought out by her objection to Christ. Now this wouldn't be so clear if it were not for the earlier conversation that Jesus had with her. When Christ first arrived at the scene, he was greeted by Martha who expressed her desire that Christ would have been there earlier. Jesus in comforting her expressed the truth that her

brother would rise again in verse 23. Martha responded in faith in verse 24 by saying, *I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day*. In response to her statement Jesus gives that beautiful declaration that he is the resurrection and the life. Martha again responds by saying that she believes that he is the Messiah, the son of God, who was to come into the world in verse 26. And then the scene moves to Mary. Now in light of this previous conversation, Martha's objection in verse 39 is most interesting. On the one hand, Martha felt that Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead in the last days because he was the resurrection and the life, but on the other hand she didn't believe that he could raise him from the dead after only 4 days. She was comforted by the power that she believed God would exert in the future, but she doubted the relevance of God's power for today.

Before we come down too hard on Martha's inconsistency, let us remember that we often have the same thinking patterns today. We believe with all of our hearts that Christ will one day come back in great glory and power and conquer all the evil forces in the world, but we often become overwhelmed in anxiety with today's struggles failing to realize that God can exercise His power just as easily now as in the future. Such reasoning is really quite ridiculous isn't it, and Christ corrected Martha's immediately with a mild rebuke. *Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?* vs. 40. If we can trust God in the future, then we can trust him right now in the present. He does not change; his power does not change. Therefore this matter of raising Lazarus was really quite a small matter for him. After all, if he one day is going to raise all of the dead who have been deceased for years, decades and centuries at the same time to glorified states, it

was just a small thing to raise one man who had been dead for 4 days.

Another interesting note is the manner in which Christ raised Lazarus. First he asked the people to remove the stone from the mouth of the tomb. As we know from our knowledge of the customs of the Jewish people at this time, the average tomb for a wealthy family in Palestine was either a natural cave or a man-made cave that had been hewn out of a rock. The average size of these tombs was about 9 feet deep, 9 feet wide, and 10 feet high. Inside, there were usually about 8 shelves that were carved into the rock, 3 on each side and 2 in the back. As family members died, they would be placed in the families' tomb on one of the shelves. The bodies were wrapped in linen garments and aromatic spices were sprinkled about them. But remember, the Jews did not embalm and mummify their corpses like the Egyptians did, soaking the bodies in chemical solutions for 70 days after taking out all of the inner organs. After several decades of decay, after only the bones were left, the bones were gathered up and put in stone boxes leaving the shelf free for another family member's use in the future. In this way, family tombs could be used generation after generation literally for hundreds of years. Covering the front of the tomb was a large, wheel shaped rock which would be rolled through a groove carved in the stone to cover the mouth of the tomb. Now Jesus asked that the stone be removed, and the obvious implication was that he was asking some of the men present to shoulder it aside for it was quite heavy.

Why did he ask for the stone to be removed? He could have miraculously caused the stone to roll aside. After all, moving a stone would require far less miraculous power than raising the dead we would assume. Wouldn't it have been

more impressive to instantly toss the stone aside with a word before raising Lazarus from the dead? But Christ did not do this. You see, while it is true that only God can raise the dead, we can move stones. And Christ desired a response of faith on the part of Martha who would have had to give permission for the stone to be moved before he would raise Lazarus from the dead.

And then for the benefit of the people viewing, so that a public demonstration of God's power would be evident, Christ lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed saying: *Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.* vs. 41,42. With those words, the Lord Jesus Christ yelled out, *Lazarus, come out.* And the Bible records that the dead man came back to life. And so we see Jesus Christ walk into confused commotion and with a confident command he restores order to that which had been chaos.

3. Now let us examine the conclusion to our miracle. And we would imagine that the power and glory of this event would change the viewers lives forever. After all, how could one remain unchanged after viewing such a miracle as this. And we are right; definitely, the witnesses to this miracle were changed. But we are surprised at how some were changed. For the response to this miracle was really 2 fold.

Notice it with me as we read together. READ John 11:45-53.

JN 11:45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. ⁴⁸ 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 and our nation."

JN 11:49 Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

JN 11:51 He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Some believed and accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Others hardened their hearts against his claim in the face of all the evidence and joined with his enemies. And the amazing conclusion is found in verse 53- "So from that day on they plotted to take his life." And even more amazing was their response to Lazarus, the man whom Christ had raised from the dead. Rather than embracing this wonderful evidence of the power of God, look what they decided to do in John 12:10,11-"So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him."

Here they were the scholars and intellects of their day. Here they were the men who claimed not to be swayed by the emotions of the time, but based their beliefs only upon sound, historic evidence and tradition. They were neutral and weighed all facts carefully before coming to a conclusion. But in face of the obvious evidence of a risen Lazarus, their true, godless bias comes out. Get rid of the evidence, for we have already chosen against God's revelation.

Jesus had healed a man born blind, giving sight to his eyes demonstrating his claim to the office of the Messiah as prophesied by Isaiah hundreds of years before. Now shortly after that, he had publicly raised Lazarus from the dead authenticating that divine claim with divine power. And many, seeing the undisputable evidence believed in him and accepted his claim personally. But many did not. And they chose in the face of the facts to reject him and to plot his death.

If we were to journey this morning into the Canadian Rocky Mountains, we could go to a small stream which is called "Divide Creek". It is high in the mountains, fed by the melting mountain snows, so is not impressive for its force or power or volume of water. But it is a unique creek and is so named because of one fork in it. As Divide Creek comes down from the mountains, it comes to one boulder which initiates a separation of the waters. The waters that flow to the left of this boulder blend into the Kicking Horse River, and finally make their way into the Pacific Ocean. The waters that take the right fork travel into the Bow River which courses into the Saskatchewan River on into Lake Winnipeg, the Nelson River, Hudson Bay and finally into the Atlantic Ocean. It is that single point of decision that determines the eventual home for every single drop of water that flows down Divide Creek.

There are certain decisions that we make in life that determine our future. Marriage decisions, Job decisions can all determine where and with whom we are going to live. But there is no decision that is as critical in our lives than whether or not we will accept Jesus Christ's claim to be the Son of God, and commit our

lives to him. That decision is most critical because it determines our eternal destination. The issue really is not whether or not there are enough facts to support Christ's claim to be the Savior of the world. We have looked at 7 miracles recorded by an eye witness, 7 miracles that Jesus performed that give clear evidence to his Messianic claim. And this final, single miracle alone that was undisputed even by the unbelieving religious leaders of his day supports Christ's claim to be the son of God. The question is "how will we respond to this claim?" And ultimately, there are only 2 ways to respond, and they are both pictured for us in this conclusion. We can either accept Christ's claim- and if we do, we will be lead to believe in him trusting in Him alone for our eternal destiny. Or we can reject Christ's claim- and if we do, we will be forced to look upon Christ as an impersonator of God and our hearts will be hardened against him. And so we must respond in one of two ways, and that response is critical, because it determines our eternal destiny.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die- he will never really die spiritually." What is your response to that claim?