



# Lazarus

| *The important role of the silent Lazarus.*

## Introduction

Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha, the famous Mary and Martha who are the subject of another study in the “Figures of the New Testament” study pack. It seems clear that the three siblings lived together and that all were unmarried. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that one or all of them had been widowed.

The three siblings made up quite a beautiful household in Bethany, a village close to Jerusalem. Their home was a kind of refuge for Jesus, the place where he could restore his soul within a setting of secure love. In the several New Testament stories involving this special family, Lazarus seems to never have a speaking part—not even when he is a key character in the story.

We can draw all kinds of conclusions from this fact. Perhaps it’s pure chance that Lazarus didn’t speak in these instances, proving nothing. Or perhaps the Gospel writers are conveying the fact that he was, indeed, a quiet man, one who perhaps said little but who nevertheless possessed such innate depth of character that Jesus would choose him as a trusted friend. If so, the silence in his story is in fact a descriptive silence. Or yet again, perhaps Lazarus’s silence is intended to picture for us a person whose worth is not in his spoken words but in what happened to him—specifically, in the miracle that was performed in Jesus’ raising him from the dead. I recall a long-ago Bible teacher who said of the Old Testament patriarch Isaac, “When you see him lying bound on the altar, you have a complete picture of Isaac’s life and personality.” Perhaps it is so with Lazarus: perhaps his role in the kingdom was as the less intrusive sibling to two quite strong and verbal sisters, and when at last he is the subject of a thorough-going miracle, he fills the role not of one acting,



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but of one acted upon—and dramatically, if I may say so. Unlike the lepers or the blind who asked Jesus for healing, or the demon-possessed who reacted violently to Jesus’ presence, Lazarus was inert, in a tomb, making no requests. No matter; he received the full attention of his Lord. He may represent many of us who have been blessed by God, not so much because of our seeking God as by the prayers of friends or family members who have sought God on our behalf.

## Lazarus Is Remembered

But hear this. Today, if you go to the Middle East and seek out the village of Bethany, you will discover that it is called *el-'Azariyeh*. The Muslim inhabitants, who consider Lazarus a saint, have named the village for him. The area includes a number of sacred sites related to Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, but Lazarus is the personality particularly revered by the Muslims. The traditional crypt of Lazarus was identified by the Bordeaux Pilgrim as early as AD 333. Later in that century a church was built over the crypt, and in 670 a monastery was added. So it is that Lazarus has found a unique place in Christian memory.

So let's move into the story of this very special man, or what little we know of him from the biblical account. As we indicated in the story of his sisters, it is easy to think of him as the youngest member of the family (tradition says as much), and very likely the particular object of his sisters' affection. Still, they probably depended upon him even while they protected and cared for him.

Then one day the beauty of the Bethany home was broken by illness. Although the Bible almost always identifies the illnesses Jesus healed—dropsy, leprosy, paralysis, or blindness—it leaves Lazarus's illness unnamed. It was serious enough that the sisters sent word to Jesus, asking him to come so that he might pray for their brother. They believed in Jesus so completely and unquestioningly that they were sure that if he prayed for Lazarus, Lazarus would be healed.

But contrary to the normal bonds of friendship, Jesus was in no hurry. When he got the message of Lazarus's illness, "he stayed two days longer in the place where he was" (John 11:6). His disciples, more concerned for their own welfare than for Lazarus, preferred that the trip to Judea be postponed still longer because they feared the increasing opposition to Jesus there. Jesus' discussion with his disciples is almost playful. "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep," he tells the disciples, "but I am going there to awaken him" (11:11). The disciples, too much realists to be humorists, answer, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." To which Jesus replies "plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe'" (11:12–14).

When Jesus and the disciples arrive in Bethany, Lazarus has already been dead four days. The number is significant. In that time and place it was popularly believed that the spirits of the dead hovered near the tomb for four days in the prospect of re-entering the body of the dead, but that after four days the spirits would finally leave because the face would be decayed beyond recognition. Going in the face of this popular idea, and Martha's cautious warning that by this time there would be "a stench" from the wasted body, Jesus insisted on the tomb stone being rolled away. "Did I not tell you," Jesus said to Martha, "that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:39–40).

Jesus then prayed, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said

this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me" (John 11:41–42). Quite clearly, Jesus meant for this to be a landmark miracle. As twenty-first-century readers we are quite ready to dismiss first-century persons as ready to believe anything. There were many such, of course, in Jesus' day just as today millions in America seek guidance regularly from astrology columns or from professional psychics. But as surely as many in the first century were credulous, so there were many who were as cautious, and as disposed to a scientific state of mind as in our own day. They did not have our wealth of data or research, but they were just as ready to seek natural explanations for what some might see as miraculous. This inclination is not unique to the twenty-first century, just as superstition is not confined to the first century or to the Middle Ages.

Jesus concluded his prayer with a command issued "with a loud voice": "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43). The Gospel writer reports the scene with minimum words and only one real adjective, but an appropriate one—*dead*—in a drumbeat of irresistible action: "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth." There must be no misunderstanding: this man is altogether captive to the tomb. "Unbind him," Jesus said, "and let him go" (11:44).

## Miracle or Legend?

Now what shall we do with such a story as this? I remember a country preacher in my boyhood who brought a smile to nearly every face when he explained that Jesus was careful to call Lazarus by name, because if he hadn't done so, the order to "come out" would have emptied the entire cemetery. But such playful histrionics aside, what really happened? Was a truly dead person truly raised from the dead?

Ultimately, our answers will depend on the presuppositions with which we read the story. If we begin with the conviction that there is no such thing as a miracle and that there are natural laws which simply cannot be broken, then we will read Lazarus's story as symbolic. If, however, we believe that miracles can happen and that it is in the province of God as to whether or when they will, we will read the story as a factual account. And of course each of these positions can be nuanced to make the point of view more acceptable for continuing discussion.

I choose to accept the story at face value. Several elements go into my thinking. For one, I figure that by definition God can do what God chooses to do. And if someone replies, "But God wouldn't violate the laws of nature," I have two possible reactions. For one, it's presumptuous for either you or me to speak with certainty as to what God chooses to do. And second, I suspect we are still learning the laws of nature and that there is still much more out there to be discovered.

## The Ironic Response

The biblical writer continues, "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him" (John 11:45). However, some of those who observed what had happened reported the event to the Pharisees. They were greatly troubled. "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation" (John 11:47–48). It's an interesting scene. The Pharisees are good people, who love their nation and their "holy place." They acknowledge that Jesus is "performing many signs," but instead of rejoicing in these evidences of a very special person, they are afraid of how the Roman government will respond. And I think they also fear what will happen to their power base in the religious and political life of the people. Most of us find it difficult to see how intertwined our own vested interests are with what we see as our most altruistic commitments.

Our sensibilities are likely to be shocked, however, by what follows. These quite admirable men—scholarly, religious, patriotic—"from that day on . . . planned to put him [Jesus] to death" (John 11:53).

See now in what ironical fashion our plot unfolds. It is not only that Jesus' most notable miracle becomes the impetus for his arrest and crucifixion, but also that in giving life to Lazarus, Jesus seals the death sentence for himself. And more than that, the raising of Lazarus thus becomes the context from which the greater resurrection, that of our Lord, will ensue.

There is irony, too, in the part that is played by the Bethany family. The Gospel writer says that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (John 11:5). When the sisters send for Jesus it is with the message, "he



It was after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead that the scholarly, religious, patriotic leaders planned to put him to death, according to John 11:53.

whom you love is ill" (John 11:3); and when Jesus wept at the tomb, the people of the community said, "See how he loved him [Lazarus]!" (John 11:36). But it is this family to whom Jesus was so affectionately bound and in whose home he seemed to find special strength and solace that became the catalyst for his arrest and execution. Judas, by choice, is the betrayer, and the Bethany family by its love is the preliminary instrument.

Tradition says that at the time of the miracle, Lazarus was thirty years of age. Not surprisingly, he soon became a kind of celebrity; crowds came not only to see and hear Jesus, "but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead" (John 12:9). Those who were plotting against Jesus began to see Lazarus himself as an issue, "since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus" (12:11). So those who were plotting the death of Jesus now extended their net of violence to Lazarus, planning if possible to kill him, as well.

One wonders if Lazarus and his sisters were perhaps especially well known in Jerusalem and Bethany, making Lazarus all the more of a public hazard to those who wanted to be rid of Jesus. If he and Martha and Mary had been quite ordinary citizens, his being raised from the dead would have been a dramatic story of course, but far more so if the family had standing in the community so that they were known to everyone.

In any event, the plot to kill Lazarus was never consummated. Tradition says that he lived another thirty years after Jesus' ascension. The biblical record gives us no further details. We don't know, for instance, if he was one of those "more than five hundred brothers and sisters" who saw Jesus at one time after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6). One assumes that he and Martha and Mary would have been part of the company who received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, but we have no

proof. It is hard to imagine that Lazarus, centerpiece of such a miracle, would simply fade into the larger body of believers without having some position of leadership. And yet, when we remind ourselves that in the biblical report of his life he had no speaking lines, it just might be that he was the kind of person who never pushed himself forward or was elevated to office by others. In my own mind I imagine him as one of those people who was held in respect by everyone, and whose counsel was sought out at times when godly judgment was needed and yet never knew public prominence. Most of us have known someone like that, and if that was Lazarus's role, I cherish him for it.

## The "Other" Lazarus

If you are a bit of a Bible student, it's likely that you have another question about Lazarus. The name also occurs in the Gospel of Luke, in a very different context indeed: in one of Jesus' parables. We're struck by this, because Lazarus wasn't a common first-century name, like James or John or Mary or Simon. And we're struck, too, because as I have just noted, it appears in a parable; and as it happens, this is the only recorded instance in which Jesus used a proper name in a parable; parables are usually about "a woman," "a certain man," or "someone."

The parabolic Lazarus was "a poor man" who lay at the gate of an unnamed rich man, hoping only for crumbs from the rich man's table. But in the world to come, the rich man was in the torment of Hades, while Lazarus was in paradise, in Abraham's bosom. The rich man appealed to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his broth-

ers, lest they end up as he has: "if someone goes to them from the dead," the rich man argues, "they will repent." But Abraham replies, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:19-31).

Obviously the Lazarus of Bethany is not the same person as Lazarus the beggar; their states in life are markedly different. But is there significance in Jesus' naming the beggar Lazarus, with the lesson that even if someone were raised from the dead the unconvinced would remain unconvinced still? I suspect it is altogether possible that Jesus is having a bit of fun with his audience—at the expense of the Pharisees and their type—when he bothers to name this character *Lazarus*, since his enemies weren't convinced by Lazarus's resurrection from the dead. They saw it only as a further reason to be rid of Jesus.

## Conclusion

I think I would have liked Lazarus. I think if I had visited that lovely home in Bethany, I would have enjoyed visiting with him (perhaps with long periods of silence, unless I carried the conversation), even as Martha and Mary were doing their thing in some other part of the house.

## About the Writer

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