

John 11:11b-15 “Why Did Lazarus Have to Die?”

JOH 11:11-15 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." 12 His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." 13 Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. 14 So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

For those of you who were here last week you'll remember that we only got through the first half of verse one where Jesus said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep..."

And some of what we touched on was that when Jesus uses such language He is not speaking of what some cults have termed "soul sleep" where, when a person dies, his soul essentially stays in the ground in a state similar to what we might call hibernation.

This is false teaching which does not take into account the whole counsel of God's word, nor does it utilize a proper understanding of how to interpret Scripture.

Jesus was using a figure of speech that was used all throughout the Old Testament to describe death from a human standpoint. And of course from a human standpoint one might view the deceased body as in a state of sleep.

But as we saw last week, though the physical body is placed in the ground it is neither in a state of sleep, nor is the spirit of man who is separated from his body at death, in a state of sleep.

The spirit of man goes immediately into the presence of God at death as Solomon points out in Ecclesiastes.

ECC 12:7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

The spirit of man will either be placed in hell, if he has not trusted in God and His promises by faith, or he will enter into God's rest as he has placed his trust and faith in the Lord as did Abraham, for example, whose faith in God's promises was reckoned to him as righteousness.

But as we pointed out last week, man was not created by God to be some disembodied spirit in the presence of the Lord, but a true human being whose body and spirit will be with the Lord forever.

Christ's resurrection from the dead makes this very clear as He is the first fruits of life over death, since He is the resurrection and the life.

1CO 15:20-23 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. 23 But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

And so, just as Christ rose physically from the dead, we who are in Christ will receive our resurrected bodies which will be like the Lord's.

PHI 3:20-21 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

The apostle John also points this out.

1JO 3:2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

In other words, when Jesus returns in the Parousia on the last day we will see the Lord of glory in His resurrected body which victoriously came out of the grave some two thousand years ago, and at that moment we will be like Him, in that our perishable bodies that went into the grave will be raised imperishable to be with the Lord forever.

1CO 15:50-55 I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - 52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying

that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

This is the hope that has been set before us.

And so, when Jesus uses the phrase that Lazarus has fallen asleep He uses a figure of speech which states how the physical body may die, but its future is to be reunited to the spirit of man who is separated from his body at death.

We see a precursor of this in this first verse of our text as Jesus continues to say, that despite Lazarus falling asleep, if you will, I will go to wake him up.

And this brings up a point I didn't have time to address last week which has to do with why Jesus uses such language. Why does Jesus describe death as sleep in this context, and why does He refer to bringing Lazarus back from the dead as a waking up event?

Well, there are a variety of reasons for this, all of which are meant for our encouragement.

As far as mankind is concerned death is the final solution. When we attend a funeral it is never with the idea of going to an event where we will wake that person up. You and I cannot wake the dead.

But for the Son of God this is not a problem. As easy as it may be for you and I to wake a sleeping person, it is just as easy for the Lord to give life where there was death.

A.W. Pink in his commentary on John gives a variety of reasons as to the importance of using such a figure of speech as sleep in connection with death.

He says, for example, "sleep is perfectly harmless. In sleep there is nothing to fear, but much to be thankful for. It's a friend and not a foe. So, for the Christian, is it with death. [This is why David could say], "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil."

Second, Pink says that "sleep comes as a welcome relief after the sorrows and toils of the day. As [Solomon said in Eccl.5:12], "the sleep of a laboring man is sweet."

The third thing Pink points out about sleep is that "in sleep we lie down to rise again." Sleep is meant to be for a short duration with

the express purpose of being refreshed to carry on in the world with a new invigoration. We lie down to rise again.”

James Montgomery Boice in his commentary on John says that “on the spiritual level death is so temporary that it can hardly be described by time-words at all. How long is death? It has no duration. It is a passage rather, a passage from this world to the next. It is a doorway. Thus to be absent from the body is to “be at home with the Lord.”

And so, when we talk about death in this sense it shows how the Scriptures, and particularly how Jesus in our text, views this subject. He is teaching how death is not unlike a short period for the physical body to be inactive only to wake refreshed and be reunited to the spirit of man who, in Christ, is already alive and with the Lord.

That too, we saw last week as we pointed out how the spirit of man in Christ immediately goes to be with the Lord at his death.

2CO 5:6-8 Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 7 We live by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

And so, Jesus uses this figure of speech in a way that shows that though man views death as a final state, God views it as a mere interruption until the body in the grave is reunited to his spirit which is very much alive.

And by the way, as we pointed out last week, all men, whether Christians or unbelievers will receive their bodies back. All will come out of the grave. And this is taught in both Old Testament and New Testament.

DAN 12:2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

ACT 24:15 and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

And so, as we come back to our text, Jesus continues to drive home His point that though Lazarus is asleep, if you will, He has every intention of waking him up. Well, of course the disciples have not caught the nuances of what Jesus was saying and instead they think He’s speaking of physical sleep.

JOH 11:12-13 His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." 13 Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

The disciples knew that Lazarus was sick and so when Jesus says he has fallen asleep they think that our Lord meant that in the course of Lazarus being sick that sleep has come on him in a healthy way.

When the body becomes ill it naturally goes into the mode of trying to repair itself as God designed it. And more times than not sleep is a good way for this to happen. But of course Jesus didn't mean physical sleep, He was alluding to how the body of Lazarus ceased to be active as his spirit was separated from his body in death.

And since His disciples were obviously not tuned into the spiritual aspect of what Jesus was saying He is going to make it quite clear what He meant.

JOH 11:14 So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead,

This they would understand. And, by the way, this is actually an encouraging passage from at least one standpoint. The disciples were obviously not aware of what Jesus was trying to say to them and so He forgoes the figure of speech and speaks plainly to them so that they would understand.

How many times have you and I been puzzled by what our Lord is trying to convey to us through His word and like these disciples we're left with this look on our faces, that look I often refer to as the dog look, where we cock our heads and go, duh?

But how many times has the Lord been gracious to us as He then makes it plain? Maybe it's through our study of His word as He reveals another passage which explains it. Maybe He simply illumines our minds to receive the truth in what He is teaching from His word, or maybe it comes through teaching like we're doing this morning where someone else in the body explains it.

Believe me God wants us to know what He's talking about. His will is not to leave us in the dark as it pertains to His purpose for us and this world as He has revealed His truth in His word.

And so, Jesus graciously tells His disciples that though they are completely wrong regarding what He meant about Lazarus

sleeping, He lets them in on what He did mean so that they can be blessed by what He's about to do.

JOH 11:14-15 So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

In connecting verse fourteen with fifteen it seems apparent that Jesus was glad that He wasn't there when Lazarus died. Now, you and I might look at this from a human standpoint and wonder how God could be so cold as not to answer the request of Martha and Mary when He is certainly capable of healing Lazarus.

And this is where we get into the whole aspect of the sovereignty of God and that will of God which is not always made readily available to us.

Sometimes we come to God for answers and we either don't get the answer we're looking for or we come away more confused as before we went to Him. Now, this doesn't mean that there isn't an answer it simply means that God is not letting us in on all that's He's doing.

Sometimes we get to see the rhyme and reason for what God does and sometimes we don't.

I can't help but think of Peter and his consternation over the fact that the apostle John was not going to experience the same fate as Peter who evidently was told by the Lord that he would suffer for his faith, probably to the point of being martyred.

JOH 21:18-19 I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

In this statement by Jesus it seems apparent that Peter was given a clear indication as to how he would die. But instead of being content with such a revelation from the risen Christ and trusting that the Lord would be with him at his death, Peter does what most of us would probably do.

JOH 21:20-21 Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to

betray you?") 21 When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"

'Wait a minute. How is it that I have to suffer for my faith while your special little pet, the one you love, doesn't have to suffer? What's up with that?'

And I love our Lord's response.

JOH 21:22 Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

If we were to put this into today's vernacular it would be something like, 'Peter, it's none of your business what I do in someone else's life. It's My business and I will do what pleases Me and what brings glory to My name. Take your eyes off of John and put them back on Me and just follow on the path I've placed you on.'

Sometimes we get so hung up on what God is doing or not doing in the life of other people that we forget that He has a very special plan for us to follow as we follow Him.

But the bottom line is that whatever He does He does it for a reason, and ultimately it's for His glory.

This is what is happening in our text. Jesus is not saying that He is glad Lazarus died, but that He is glad He wasn't there to keep him from dying because what He is about to do is for the benefit of all whether they understand it now or not.

In our particular case here in our text Jesus reveals why He is glad that He didn't go to Lazarus' side while he was alive, but waited until he died.

JOH 11:15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Everything that the Lord does in our lives is for our benefit, particularly our spiritual benefit. And here Jesus makes it plain that His desire is for His disciples to grow in their faith towards Him.

It's not as though they were without faith or didn't believe. They did continue to follow Christ while others left Him. Peter, by faith, acknowledges Jesus as the Christ.

MAT 16:16-17 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon

son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

The other disciples had similar responses in their agreement that Jesus was the Christ and yet our Lord desires that their faith become even stronger so that they will not be moved. And what better way for this to happen than for Jesus to perform some spectacular miracle which continues to verify that He is the Son of God.

You and I in Christ have faith in Him and yet we too are told to grow in that faith.

2TH 1:3-4 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. 4 Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

Faith is a gift from God. It was the gift that was given to you and me as we placed that faith in our Lord and Savior for our salvation. This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the Ephesians.

EPH 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

But this faith must continue to grow in the sense that it allows us to be better servants of our Most High God, especially as the spiritual war in which we're involved, heats up. This is why James says that "the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (JAM 1:3-4)

Now, I know people who would suggest that their faith is weak and therefore they aren't able to go forward with Christ in a way where they can work through hardship for Christ. Well, the question is then, how do we grow in our faith so that we can go forward to the glory of God?

Because not growing in our faith is not an option. If we're not going forward we're not standing still, we are actually going backward. And so, it is imperative to grow in this faith.

And by the way, it really doesn't make any difference how small your faith is because whatever faith we have from the Lord is abundantly sufficient to carry on for Christ. This is what Jesus told His disciples as He used the mustard seed as a standard.

MAT 17:20 "... I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

Though our faith may be small our Lord can still use it as we trust Him for all things. But our faith can and should grow. And it grows in a variety of ways. But they are ways we must utilize if we are to see our faith grow.

One way that our faith grows is through simply seeking God's face with the express purpose of trusting and relying on Him for all things.

MAT 6:31-33 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

If we're seeking first the things of this world then there is very little room for faith to be practiced. Faith will not grow unless it is exercised.

JAM 2:18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.

From a medical standpoint, if you or I were to all of a sudden live a purely sedentary life, where we never got up from the couch, our muscles would begin to atrophy. Our bodies would begin to be weakened. Well, it's the same in a spiritual sense.

If we never step out in faith and live in that faith in our God, whom we can trust for all things, then our ability to grow spiritually is hindered. This is why it is imperative for our faith to be tested. Sometimes God will force us off of the couch by knocking us to the ground.

Now what do I do? The floor is not very comfortable. At least the couch was soft and cushiony. Maybe I should get up off of the floor and make it back to the couch. And so, we get up. But as we get up we find that God has set the couch on fire.

Now what do I do? Let's get the fire extinguisher to save the couch, only to find that God has replaced the contents of the fire extinguisher with gasoline. And it begins to dawn on us that maybe God wants us up off of the couch so that we can exercise the faith He's given us to live for His glory.

1PE 1:6-9 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

As we begin to understand the goal of our faith we begin to put into perspective the glory of our faith. And in that realization we have a much deeper appreciation of what God is trying to do in our lives as we grow in this faith.

Another way we grow in faith is directly proportional to our growth in the grace and knowledge of our Lord. This comes from studying His word, meditating upon it and making it a part of our hearts as we are doers of the word in His grace and strength.

1PE 2:2 Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...

To think that we can grow in our faith when we're not feeding our souls with God's word is not to understand the means Christ has established for our growth, which is why Jesus prayed the way He did to the Father.

JOH 17:17 Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

So, don't neglect the word in your growth with the Lord. Another way of growing in our faith is to be encouraged by each other's faith. This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Thessalonians.

1TH 3:10 Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

How did Paul seeing the Thessalonians face to face supply what was lacking in their faith? Simply by testifying what the Lord had done in his life and how he was still standing. And this is precisely

why the writer of Hebrews said, do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together.

In other words, personal fellowship and worship with each other is essential if we are to grow in our faith.

And of course, one last thing which can help us grow in our faith is to see God working in our lives and the lives of others in a dynamic way; maybe through answered prayer, maybe through Him supplying our needs in a special way, or maybe even through a miracle.

This is what Jesus is going to do for His disciples in our text, and next week we'll visit Bethany where Lazarus is now laying in a tomb, and we'll begin to see how the Lord always meant for Lazarus' death to be a blessing to all concerned, including Lazarus.

May we trust the Lord in all things and in all circumstances with the understanding that He wants us to grow and be those mighty warriors for Christ.

2PE 3:18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.