

John 11:44-53 “Dressed to Kill”

Last week we left Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus as He called forth to Lazarus to come out of the grave. And of course we read in verse 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.”

What an amazing work of God as He is able to bring life where there was only death. This is a very graphic picture of how God also works in the life of all of us who were spiritually dead outside of faith in Christ.

As I mentioned last week the apostle Paul pointed this out to the church in Ephesus when he wrote to them.

EPH 2:1-5 As for you, ***you were dead in your transgressions and sins***, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, ***God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions*** - it is by grace you have been saved.

This is Lazarus, if you will, from a spiritual stand-point. Though the world might be viewed as vertical and breathing, all men outside of Christ are dead men walking. If this sounds like an over statement we need only go to the same apostle Paul who wrote to the church in Rome concerning this old nature we are born with which only wants to please self and has no desire for the things of God.

ROM 3:10-12 As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, ***not even one.***"

This may not be a popular stance from the world’s perspective, but unless we are willing to call God a liar, it is clear that from a spiritual stand-point we are truly dead in our trespasses and sins. But, it is God who is able to call us out of the tomb of sin and death and give us life as His Spirit gives us eyes to see and ears to

hear so that we can then respond by faith as we embrace Christ as Lord and Savior.

But what I find interesting about our text, and particularly the end of verse 44, is that after Christ gives Lazarus his physical life back as He calls him out of the tomb, He then instructs those standing by to assist Lazarus in his ability to begin living that life by untying him. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Now, as we saw last week, to think that Jesus was capable of giving life to Lazarus and yet not capable of taking care of some of the smaller details, like rolling away the stone or having those standing nearby take off the grave clothes of Lazarus, is like suggesting that Olympian weight lifters can lift hundreds of pounds and yet are not capable of opening the door to get to the competition.

Part of what the Holy Spirit is teaching us here is that as vital as Christ is in giving us eternal life, He allows us to participate in the process. And of course part of the process is being entrusted with the word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ as we give it people in love.

What are we told? Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. Well, who gives people the word of God? You and I in Christ. And quite honestly our Almighty God views us, who are involved in His will to save people by giving the world the gospel, as those He is pleased with.

ISA 52:7 How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

And so, as it relates to the salvation of sinners we play an important part on God's behalf as He gives life to those who hear His word and embrace Christ by faith.

But as our text intimates He also allows us to participate in the ability to help fellow believers grow and be productive members of the family of God. Now, I don't mean to over spiritualize this passage in verse 44, but it is worth noting that our Lord encourages those standing by to take the grave clothes off of Lazarus.

Of course grave clothes are associated with only one thing and that is death. Once Christ gave life to Lazarus there was no need for

such things and they actually hindered him from continuing successfully in his new life.

If you remember that old black and white movie about the mummy you can probably still see this creature all bound in wrappings walking around terrorizing people as he came out of the grave.

But one thing you might also remember is that the mummy never ran after people. He was always walking slowly with his hands outstretched in front of his body as he shuffled along. And this used to make me wonder how he ever caught anyone. If you could walk at even a reasonable pace you could have escaped, but like deer caught in the headlights the victims of the mummy never got out of his way.

Lazarus would have spent the rest of his life shuffling along if his only clothing were these grave clothes, not to mention how inappropriate he would have been viewed at parties and family gatherings. What a fashion statement.

But seriously, from a spiritual standpoint all of us retain some aspect of these grave clothes which slow us down. It's called the flesh. And though it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to grow in our sanctification as we are conformed into the image of Christ, it is other believers who can help us in this process.

You and I actually participate in some degree in helping each other to take off the grave clothes. But how do we do that?

Well, one of the ways is in helping each other consider the truth of God's word as we encourage each other to walk in the truth.

Remember it was our Lord Jesus who prayed to the Father, as it is recorded in this very gospel, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." (JOH 17:17)

If we are sanctified by the truth, which is to say that we grow in our faith by the truth of God's word, how is that accomplished on a practical level? Well, only as we are in the truth. That can happen as we as individuals are reading, meditating on and studying the word of God.

But it doesn't exclude how each of us are to be doing that for each other. Now, as we sit here this morning I, as part of the body of Christ, am able to use my gifts to instruct and encourage you from God's word and hopefully I am assisting in your sanctification.

But this process is not limited to Pastors and teachers of the word of God. All of us are given this wonderful privilege from God to do this with every member of the body of Christ.

How many times have you shared with someone how God was faithful to you in His ability to provide for your needs, or how He revealed something of His will in your life when you least expected it, as you shared that with fellow believers?

All of life is a learning process and as it pertains to God's truth, found in His word, where we can utilize all of our life experiences in light of the truth to help other believers look to Christ and to grow in Him.

At other times you may be able to point people back to particular passages found in the word of God to encourage someone who needs some answers from God. This is all part of the teaching process that every believer is able to participate in as the Lord encourages us to help take off the grave clothes of other believers.

HEB 10:24-25 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

And so, as we are there for one another let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Because as we are doing that which pleases God, it also enables us to help each other in removing those grave clothes which only slow us down in loving and serving Christ.

And so, as those people were there for Lazarus at the command from Christ to let him go, he was then freed up from the encumbrance of the wrappings which kept him from moving freely in his new life.

Now, you would think that such a miracle would convince everyone there in Bethany that Jesus was truly the Son of God and that they would believe on Him, and some certainly did as our text explains.

JOH 11:45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

In this passage we find a connection between Mary and what some of these people had seen in the miracle of Jesus. In other words, it

wasn't just the miracle that convinced some of these folks to believe.

What this means is that Mary was testifying of Christ in such a way, in light of the miracle, to where she was encouraging people to accept Christ by faith. This is similar to what we saw earlier in this gospel with the woman at the well.

JOH 4:39-42 *Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony*, "He told me everything I ever did." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. 41 And because of his words many more became believers. 42 They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

In a similar way, Mary was testifying of Christ, even before Jesus came to Bethany after the death of Lazarus. It was the death of Lazarus that precipitated people coming from Jerusalem and Bethany to comfort her. And so, in light of all of these people coming to her she was able to share her faith in Christ.

But it probably wasn't until after the raising of her brother from the dead, where we see the impact of what she said both before and after the raising, as many of these people actually believed.

By the way, it's worth noting here what the Scriptures don't tell us about Lazarus. If this chronicle were written by mere men we would certainly have expected this story to end with an account of a big party and dancing in the streets as they celebrated the life of Lazarus.

But this shows how it is God and His will which is being accomplished here as the Holy Spirit has inspired this portion of the word of God without such an account. The reason is that it is not really about Lazarus as much as it's about what Christ did with Lazarus which is going to accelerate the events leading up to the crucifixion of Christ.

The gospel of John is all about Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world, and all of these other events are part of the way in which our salvation is going to come to fruition, including the death and raising of Lazarus.

And so, you've got a segment of the friends and family who are now convinced both by what Mary testified about Jesus and the

miracle of Jesus, and many believed. But what is more amazing is the attitude of another group of Jews here in Bethany.

JOH 11:46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

These people are placed in opposition to the ones mentioned in verse 45. And so, they were not going back to the Pharisees with the intention of sharing how Jesus really is the One they ought to be trusting as their Messiah.

In fact, what probably has happened here is that some of these very people who went to the Pharisees were probably sent by the Pharisees in the first place. People coming from Jerusalem is intimidated earlier in this account.

JOH 11:17-19 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.

Of these many Jews most of them were undoubtedly true friends of the family and had no axe to grind with them. But with such an upheaval as the death of Lazarus it is likely that the leaders in Jerusalem would also have heard of Lazarus' death and they certainly knew that he was a friend of Jesus. And so, they put two and two together and knew Jesus would eventually show up.

And so, they probably sent people to Bethany who would gather information as to the whereabouts of Jesus. Their hatred for Jesus had not subsided since they tried to stone Him only weeks before for healing the man born blind and then claiming Himself to be God.

And so, some of the people at the tomb who witnessed the miracle went back to the leaders in Jerusalem and reported what they saw. And of course what they saw was Jesus calling a dead man out of the tomb, and the dead man coming out.

It has to make us wonder how someone can witness such a miracle and not be moved to faith by it. But again, this goes back to the hardness of man's heart which in and of itself does not want the things of God. This is what the prophet Jeremiah records for us.

JER 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

From a human stand-point this statement is absolutely true. Man cannot cure his own deceitful heart and he certainly cannot understand how he can be so deceitful. That's the way deceit works; it won't admit its hardness and so it pretends to something it's not and it continues in its evil ways.

But this statement is not true from a heavenly perspective. Because though man cannot cure such a heart, God can and does as he understands the sinfulness of man and how only God can come to his rescue. The prophet Ezekiel makes this clear.

EZE 36:26-27 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

This is a work only God can do and so we shouldn't be surprised that some of the people who witnessed this miracle, and of course the Pharisees and Sadducees who sent them, would continue to seek the death of Christ.

By the way, I don't think it's a coincidence that another man by the name of Lazarus is associated with this very issue. The story Christ told of the rich man and Lazarus, (not the Lazarus of our text), had both of them eventually dying. The rich man went to hell, while Lazarus went to be with Abraham in heaven.

The rich man pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus back to his family to prove to them that hell is a real place and that they must place their faith in God and His promises regarding the Messiah.

LUK 16:27-31 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' 29 "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 30 "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' 31 "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

If the heart remains hard, then not even someone rising from the dead will convince them. And that is the case with the Lazarus of our text coming back from the dead. Not even a dead man coming back phased some of these Jews who were bent on destroying Christ. Notice the response of the Jewish leaders to the report of their spies.

JOH 11:47-48 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."

On one level this is a remarkable statement in light of the evidence which they seem to accept regarding the miracles of Jesus.

The first thing we see is that the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. This was a formal judicial council made up of all the members of the ruling body of Israel.

What's interesting is that this body, called the Sanhedrin, was made up of two opposing groups; the Pharisees and the Sadducees. In today's world this might be similar to conservatives and liberals, with the Pharisees being the conservatives and the Sadducees being the liberals.

But this is where the analogy ends because the Pharisees were not really seen as a political entity whereas this is what defined the Sadducees. The Pharisees were those who took seriously the law and the Scriptures as they understood them, and so they were the more religious group. Whereas the Sadducees were not very religious minded at all.

It was the Sadducees who didn't believe much of what the bible taught as they felt the Scriptures were a compilation of stories with morals attached to them; not unlike how many liberal "theologians" view the Scriptures today where they don't believe in the miracles of Jesus or the literalness of the creation of the world by God in six days.

That's who these Sadducees were. In fact, Matthew points this out in his gospel as the position of the Sadducees who question Jesus on the resurrection.

MAT 22:23-24 That same day *the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection*, came to him with a question. 24 "Teacher," they said, "Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him.

After them trying to dance around the answers of Jesus our Lord finally told them, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels

in heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead - have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living." When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching." (MAT 22:29-33)

On one occasion the apostle Paul was arrested by the Romans for creating a disturbance as he was sharing the gospel with the Jews who reacted badly, along with the Roman guard who took him to be flogged. He then threatened them by saying that he was a Roman citizen and so the Romans let him go, but the next day the commander of the Roman guard took him to the Sanhedrin to find out why they were upset with Paul.

In the process of Paul standing on his convictions that Jesus is the Christ, Ananias, the high priest, ordered Paul to be struck on the mouth. Now we usually associate Paul as being humble and meek in one sense, but he was certainly no wilting flower on other occasions. And so, when he was struck he said this.

ACT 23:3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

Well, that didn't go over well and Paul was reminded that Ananias was the high priest and so he apologizes. But his next comment gives us some insight into his understanding of the differences between Pharisees and Sadducees.

ACT 23:6-10 Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." 7 When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) 9 There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" 10 The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

The Pharisees and Sadducees hated each other, but what we find in our text is that they hated Christ more as they would come together for the common cause of destroying the one who jeopardized their standing with the Roman government.

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Notice what was more important to this body of leaders who were to be representing God and His word as they were to be leading Israel in righteousness. Jesus, whom they acknowledge as the One who has raised a dead man from the grave, is not even considered as Messiah. Their only consideration is their own agenda.

They have two concerns which effect one main concern. The first is that they would lose the popular support of the Jews in Israel. Everyone will believe in Him, is what they say. But they don't care about that as long as it doesn't affect another of their concerns which is the crux of the matter.

"If they believe in Him then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

What gives power to these alleged leaders is the position they hold in respect to the temple God set up for Israel; their entire religious system. That's what they mean when they say, they will take away our place. The word for place here is the Greek word *topos* and it's the exact same word used by Stephen as he testified of how the Jews killed Jesus.

ACT 6:13-14 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place (*topos*) and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place (*topos*) and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

It was the holy place in Jerusalem, the temple, and the laws and customs associated with it, that defined the Sanhedrin and if the Romans took away the temple there would be no need for such rulers whose nation would then be taken away from them as the Romans would take over complete rule. This was their priority.

As A.W. Pink puts it in his commentary on John, [these Jewish rulers] claimed for themselves what belonged to God. The holy things were, in their eyes, their special property.”

And next week we’ll see how things go from bad to worse as the high priest settles this issue.

Let me leave you with this. These religious leaders in Israel at this time had wealth and prestige and yet they were willing to kill the very one who came to give life as He proved with Lazarus that He was in fact the resurrection and the life.

It reminds me of what Jesus told us in MAR 8:36-37 What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? 37 Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

People are willing to exchange all sorts of things for their souls, but if we’ve been given life in Christ, then may we tear off the grave clothes and live as one’s redeemed by the blood of the lamb, and may we help each other in seeking Christ and growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior.