

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

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THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

Reading: John 11:1-15

Remember we are looking at the miracles as “signs” which tell us very important lessons.

Background: Jesus left Jerusalem and crossed the River Jordan to the place where John at first baptised. Three years had passed since John baptised him and his public work began. Jesus knew the end of his ministry was drawing near. Before his own death and resurrection the greatest miracle of all was yet again to be performed. Jesus had given life to the widow’s son at Nain and to Jarius’ daughter. Now he is to raise the dead once more to show that Jesus has power over man’s greatest enemy – death, and that for those who die in Christ, death is but a sleep.

In Bethany, Jesus had close friends; they were Mary, Martha and Lazarus. It would appear that Simon, Martha’s husband had died because he was a leper (Mark 14:3) and now the house was called Martha’s, from this it appears that she had been left a widow. Now more problems hit this God fearing family. Lazarus was very ill. Immediately the sisters’ thoughts went to Jesus for they knew that he could do great miracles of healing and so they sent a message to him that Lazarus was very ill.

Jesus was on the eastern side of Jordan and when he heard the message about Lazarus he replied to the messenger, “This sickness is not unto death but for the glory of God”. This reply seemed very strange, almost as if the illness of Lazarus was not serious. For two days Jesus delayed his journey to Bethany. Why did he not rush to help his friends and put their worry away?

Jesus told his disciples that he now intended to return to Judea, his disciples were amazed at this because when he left there he almost lost his life. The disciples knew that to go back would mean great danger to them all. He told his disciples the reason for their return, “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth, but I go and I will awake him out of sleep.” There was confusion here; the disciples thought Jesus meant normal, healthy sleep. In fact Jesus knew that Lazarus had died and he spoke of the sleep of death. So Jesus had spoken of death as just a sleep. What could this mean? Jesus added that he was glad for the disciples’ sake and that he had not been with Lazarus when he died so that they might believe. So that miracle which was to follow was as much for the learning and comfort of the disciples as for the little family at Bethany.

At Bethany, the burial of Lazarus was over and the tomb sealed. Many of the friends of Mary and Martha stayed with the sisters to comfort them.

Meanwhile, news that Jesus was approaching reached the sisters, so Martha left the house and hurried to Jesus crying out, “If you had been here my brother had not died”, and Jesus replied, “Thy brother will rise again.”

Martha understood that he would rise at the last day, but did not think that he might be restored immediately. She told Jesus, “I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day”.

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life... He that believeth in me though he were dead yet shall he live...He that liveth and believeth in me shall never die.”

Jesus looked into the face of Martha and asked, “Do you believe?”, again came the response, “Yes Lord, I believe that thou art the Christ the Son of the living God which should come into the world”.

By now they had reached the house and Mary now ran to Jesus with the same plea as Martha. Jesus was deeply affected at the grief of Martha and Mary and all the people crying. They showed Jesus where Lazarus was buried, there was a stone by the tomb and the scene was one of deep sorrow. Jesus himself wept. Why? He was not weeping because of the death of Lazarus because he knew that he was about to raise him from the dead. Jesus was weeping because he saw in this death the sorrow of all humanity, the sorrow that brings death because of sin. In a short time he too would be placed in a tomb, but that was not to be the end. Jesus was to make the way of salvation from death for those who would believe.

Standing by the tomb, Jesus asked for the stone to be rolled away. Martha was horrified because he had been in the grave four days and in that climate the body would have begun to decay. However Jesus had it removed and then Jesus prayed to God in front of them. All this was to show that the miracle which was about to happen was not performed by him alone, but by the power given from the Father. After he prayed the voice of authority rang out, “Lazarus, come forth”. To the amazement of the hushed assembly, Lazarus bound in grave clothes, shuffled out of the tomb. The people were stunned as Lazarus stood helpless before the Saviour. “Loose him”, said Jesus, “and let him go”. The crying was over, Lazarus was restored to the sisters who loved him so much; you would have thought everyone would be happy. However, this was not so. The Scribes and Pharisees were more and more angry and jealous of his teaching and miracles, so they decided that they must get rid of this man Jesus before more believed on him. In fact we know it was all in God’s purpose and the ministry of Jesus was coming to the end, but from this time Jesus was a marked man and watched day and night. The Sanhedrin was assembled and it was decided that it was official council policy to put him to death (v 53). However Jesus knew their plans and went and hid himself, for there were still a few things to be accomplished before his time was over.

Leaving the happy little family in Bethany now restored, we must consider the true meaning of the miracle.

Jesus showed without doubt that he had the power to raise people from the dead. In other words, Jesus had power over the curse of death.

Now we know that Jesus said that whosoever believed in him would never die. But in fact many of those who believed in Jesus have indeed died. However, this “death” was called by Jesus only “sleep” because those who believe in Jesus will have the opportunity to be called from the grave just as Lazarus was. This was the greatest sign (or miracle) that Jesus did because it showed that he had the power over man’s greatest enemy. Death to us is just a sleep. 1 Thess. 4:14-16, but to those who choose to go their own way and not accept God’s offer of salvation will go into the grave and remain there forever. Many things for us to think about today!

Extra work: Read John 11:25-26 and discuss what these verses mean.