

Exposition of the Gospel of John CHAPTER 38 CHRIST RAISING LAZARUS (CONTINUED)

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Transcript

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CHAPTER 38

CHRIST RAISING LAZARUS (CONTINUED)

John 11:11-27

The following is a suggested Analysis of the passage which is to be before us:— 1. Christ announces Lazarus' death, but the disciples misunderstand Him, verses 11-13. 2. Christ rejoices for their sake that He had been absent from Bethany, verses 14, 15. 3. Thomas' melancholy devotion, verse 16. 4. Lazarus in the grave four days already, verse 17. 5. The nearness of Jerusalem to Bethany, verse 18. 6. Many Jews come to comfort the sisters, verse 19. 7. The conversation between Christ and Martha, verses 20-27. In the previous lesson we have seen how the Lord Jesus received a touching message that Lazarus was dying; in the passage now before us we behold Him making for Bethany, Lazarus having died and been buried in the interval. The central thing in John 11 is Christ made known as the resurrection and the life, and everything in it only serves to bring out by way of contrast the blessedness of this revelation. Resurrection can be displayed only where death has come in, and what is so much emphasized here is the desolation which death brings and man's helplessness in the presence of it. First, Lazarus himself is dead; then Thomas speaks of the disciples accompanying the Lord to Bethany that they may die with Him (John 11:16); then Martha comes before us; and though in the presence of Christ, she could think only of the death of her brother (John 11:21); it was the same with Mary (John 11:32); finally, the Jews who had come to comfort the bereaved sisters are seen "weeping" (John 11:33), and even as the Lord stands before the grave, they have no thought that He was about to release the tomb's victim (John 11:37). What a background was all this for Christ to display His wondrous glory! It is not difficult for us to discern here behind the dark shadows that which is far more solemn and tragic. Physical death is but the figure, as well as the effect, of another death infinitely more dreadful. The natural man is dead in trespasses and sins. The wages of sin is death, and when the first man sinned he received those fearful wages. In the day that Adam ate of the forbidden fruit he died, died spiritually, as a penal infliction. And Adam died spiritually not only as a private individual, but as the head and public representative of his race. Just as the severing of the trunk of a tree from its roots, means (in a short time) the death of each of its boughs, twigs and leaves, so the fall of Adam dragged down with him every member of the human race. It is for this reason that

every one born into this world enters it "alienated from the life of God" (Eph. 4:18). Yes, the natural man, the world over, is spiritually dead. He is alive worldwards, selfwards, sinwards, but dead Godwards. It is not that there is a spark of life within which by careful cultivation or religious exercises may be fanned into a flame; he is completely devoid of Divine life. He needs to be born again; an altogether new life, than the one he possesses by nature, must be imparted to him, if ever he is to enter the kingdom of God. The sinner's condition is far, far worse than he has any idea of, or than the great majority of the doctors of divinity suppose. Of what use is a "remedy" to one who is dead? and yet the thoughts of very few rise any higher when they think and talk of the Gospel. Of what use is it to reason and argue with a corpse? and yet that is precisely what the sinner is from the standpoint of God. "Then, why preach the Word to sinners at all, if they are incapable of hearing it?" is the question which will naturally occur to the reader. Sad, sad indeed that such a question is asked at this late day—sad, because of the God-dishonoring ignorance which it displays. No intelligent servant of God preaches the Word because he imagines that the will and mind of the sinner is capable of responding to it, any more than when God commanded Ezekiel to "Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord" (Ezek. 37:4), he supposed the objects of his message were capable of responding. "Well, why preach at all?" First, because God has commanded us to do so, and who are we to call into question His wisdom? Second, because the very words we are commanded to preach, "they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). The Word we are to "hold forth" is "the word of life" (Phil. 2:16). The new birth is "not of blood (by natural descent), nor of the will of the flesh (his own volition), nor of the will of man (the preacher's persuasion), but OF GOD" (John 1:13), and the seed which God uses to produce the new birth is His own Word (James 1:18). Now this is what is so strikingly and so perfectly illustrated here in John 11. Lazarus was dead, and that he had died was unmistakably evidenced by the fact that his body was already corrupting. In like manner, the spiritual death of the natural man is plainly manifested by the corruptions of his heart and life. In the opening paragraph we have sought to bring out how that which is emphasized here in John 11 is the utter helplessness of man in the presence of death. And this is what the servant of God needs to lay hold of in its spiritual application. If it was only a matter of stupidity in the sinner, we might overcome that by clearly reasoned statements of the truth. If it was simply a stubborn will that stood in the way of the sinner's salvation, we could depend upon our powers of persuasion. If it was merely that the sinner's soul was sick, we could induce him to accept some "remedy." But in the presence of death we are impotent. "All of this sounds very discouraging," says the reader. So much the better if it results in bringing us upon our faces before God. Nothing is more healthful than to be emptied of self-sufficiency. The sooner we reach this place the better. "For we," said Paul, "have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). The quicker we are made to realize our own helplessness, the more likely are we to seek help from God. The sooner we recognize that "the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63), the readier shall we be to cry unto God for His all-sufficient grace. It is not until we cease to depend upon ourselves that we begin to depend upon God. "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26), and this, be it remembered, was said by Christ in answer to the disciples' query, "Who then can be saved?" Here, then, is where light breaks in. Here is where the "glory of God" (John 11:4) shines forth. Man may be helpless before death, not so God. Lazarus could not raise himself, nor could his beloved sisters and sorrowing friends bring him back from the grave. Ah! but He who is, Himself, "the resurrection and the life" comes on the scene, and all is altered. And what does He do? Why, He did that which must have seemed surpassingly strange to all who beheld Him. He cried to the dead man, "Come forth." But what was the use of doing that? Had Lazarus the power in himself to come forth? Most certainly not—had Mary or Martha, or any of the apostles cried, "Lazarus, come forth" that would have been unmistakably evidenced. No man's voice is able to pierce the depths of the tomb. But it was One who was more than man, who now

spake, and He said, "Come forth" not because Lazarus was capable of doing so, but because it was life-giving Voice which spake. The same omnipotent lips which called a world into existence by the mere fiat of His mouth, now commanded the grave to give up its victim. It was the Word of power which penetrated the dark portals of that sepulcher. And here, dear reader, is the comforting, inspiring, and satisfying truth for the Christian worker. We are sent forth to preach the Word to lost and dead sinners, because, under the sovereign application of the Holy Spirit, that Word is "the word of life." Our duty is to cry unto God daily and mightily that He may be pleased to make it such to some, at least, of those to whom we speak. Before we come to the actual raising of Lazarus, our chapter records many interesting and instructive details which serve to heighten the beauty of its central feature. The Lord Jesus was in no hurry; with perfect composure He moved along in Divine dignity and yet human compassion to the grief-stricken home at Bethany. At every point two things are prominent: the imperfections of man and the perfections of Christ. "These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth" (John 11:11). The "these things" are the declaration that the sickness of Lazarus was for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby (John 11:4); His expressed intention of returning to Judea (John 11:7); and His avowed assurance that there could be no "stumbling" seeing that He ever walked in the unclouded light of the Father's countenance (John 11:9). In these three things we learn the great principles which regulated the life of Christ—lowliness, dependence, obedience. He now announced that Lazarus was no longer in the land of the living, referring to his death under the figure of "sleep." The figure is a very beautiful one, and a number of most blessed thoughts are suggested by it. It is a figure frequently employed in the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testaments: in the former it is applied to saved and unsaved: but in the N.T. it is used only of the Lord's people.[1] In the N.T. it occurs in such well-known passages as 1 Corinthians 15:20, 51: "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept... Behold, I show you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed"; and 1 Thessalonians 4:14, 5:10: "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him . . . Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him." Below we give some of the leading thoughts suggested by this figure:— First, sleep is perfectly harmless. In sleep there is nothing to fear, but, much to be thankful for. It is a friend and not a foe. So, for the Christian, is it with death. Said David, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil." Such ought to be the triumphant language of every child of God. The "sting" has gone from death (1 Cor. 15:56, 57), and has no more power to hurt one of Christ's redeemed, than a hornet has after its sting has been extracted. Second, sleep comes as a welcome relief after the sorrows and toils of the day. As the wise man declared, "The sleep of a laboring man is sweet" (Ecclesiastes 5:12). Death, for the believer, is simply the portal through which he passes from this scene of sin and turmoil to the paradise of bliss. As 1 Corinthians 3:22 tells us, "death" is ours. Sleep is a merciful provision, not appreciated nearly as much as it should be. The writer learned this lesson some years ago when he witnessed a close friend, who was suffering severely, seeking sleep in vain for over a week. Equally merciful is death for one who is prepared. Try to imagine David still alive on earth after three thousand years! Such a protracted existence in this world of sin and suffering would probably have driven him hopelessly crazy long ago. How thankful we ought to be that we have not the longevity of the antediluvians! Third, in sleep we lie down to rise again. It is of but brief duration; a few hours snatched from our working time, then to awaken and rise to a new day. In like manner, death is but a sleep and resurrection, an awakening. "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). On the glorious resurrection morn the dead in Christ shall be awakened, to sleep no more, but live forever throughout the perfect Day of God. Fourth, sleep is a time of rest. The work of the day is exchanged for sweet repose. This is what

death means for the Christian: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors" (Rev. 14:13). This applies only to the "intermediate state," between death and resurrection. When we receive our glorified bodies there will be new ministries for us to engage in, for it is written, "His servants shall serve him" (Rev. 22:3). Fifth, sleep shuts out the sorrows of life. In sleep we are mercifully unconscious of the things which exercise us throughout the day. The repose of night affords us welcome relief from that which troubles us by day. It is so in death. Not that the believer is unconscious, but that those in paradise know nothing of the tears which are shed on earth. Scripture seems to indicate that there is one exception in their knowledge of what is transpiring down here: the salvation of sinners is heralded on high (Luke 15:7, 10). Sixth, one reason perhaps why death is likened to a sleep is to emphasize the ease with which the Lord will quicken us. To raise the dead (impossible as it appears to the skeptic) will be simpler to Him than arousing a sleeper. It is a singular thing that nothing so quickly awakens one as being addressed by the voice. So we are told "the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice" (John 5:28). Seventh, sleep is a time when the body is fitted for the duties of the morrow. When the awakened sleeper arises he is refreshed and invigorated, and ready for what lies before him. In like manner, the resurrected believer will be endued with a new power. The limitations of his mortal body will no longer exist. That which was sown in weakness shall be raised in power. But O how vastly different is it for one who dies in his sins. The very reverse of what we have said above will be his portion. Instead of death delivering him from the sorrows of this life, it shall but introduce him to that fearful place whose air is filled with weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. It is true that sinners too shall be raised from the dead, but it will be unto "the resurrection of damnation." It will be in order to receive bodies in which they will suffer still more acutely the eternal torments of the lake of fire. To all such, death will be far worse than the most frightful nightmare. And O unsaved reader, there is but a step between thee and death. Your life hangs by a slender thread, which may snap at any moment. Be warned then, ere it is too late. Flee, even now, from the wrath to come. Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, for there is no hope beyond the grave. "After that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep" (John 11:11). What marvelous condescension was it for the Lord of glory to call a poor worm of the earth His "friend"! But note He said, "Our friend." This, we believe, was a word of rebuke to His fearful and distrustful disciples; Our friend—yours, as well as Mine. He has also shown you kindness. You have professed to love him; will you now leave him to languish! His sisters are sorrowing, will you ignore them in their extremity! That is why He here says "I go"—contrast the "us" in verses 7 and 15. Our friend—I go. I to whom the danger is greatest. I am ready to go. It was both a rebuke and an appeal. He had told them that the sickness of Lazarus was in order that the Son of God might be glorified thereby (John 11:4), would they be indifferent as to how that glory would be displayed! "I go that I may awaken"—go, even though to His own death. He "pleased not himself." Thoughts of His own personal safety would no more retard Him than He had allowed personal affection to hasten Him. What is before Him was the Father's glory, and no considerations of personal consequences would keep Him from being about His Father's business. The moment had come for the Father's glory to shine forth through the Son: therefore, His "I go," sharply contrasted from the "he abode two days still" of John 11:6. He was going to awaken Lazarus: "None can awaken Lazarus out of this sleep, but He who made Lazarus. Every mouse or gnat can raise us from that other sleep; none but an omnipotent power from this." (R. Hall). "Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep" (John 11:12, 13). It is clear from their language that the disciples had not understood the Lord: they supposed He meant that Lazarus was recovering. Yet, the figure He had used was not obscure; it was one which the Old Testament scriptures should have made them thoroughly familiar with. Why then, had they

failed to perceive His meaning? The answer is not hard to find. They were still timid and hesitant of returning to Judea. But why should that have clouded their minds? Because they were occupied with temporal circumstances. It was "stoning" they were concerned about, the stoning of their beloved Lord—though if He was stoned, there was not much likelihood that they would escape. And when our thoughts are centered upon temporal things, or when selfish motives control us, our spiritual vision is eclipsed. It is only as our eye is single (to God's glory) that our whole body is full of light. "Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead" (John 11:14). What a proof was this of the omniscience of Christ. He knew that Lazarus was already dead, though the disciples supposed he was recovering from his sickness. No second message had come from Bethany to announce the decease of the brother of Martha and Mary. And none was needed. Though in the form of a servant, in the likeness of man, Christ was none other than the Mighty God, and clear proof of this did He here furnish. How blessed to know that our Savior is none other than Immanuel! "And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him" (John 11:15). But why should Christ be glad for the disciples' sake that He was absent from Bethany at the time Lazarus was sinking? Because the disciples would now be able to witness a higher manifestation of His glory, than what they otherwise would had He been present while Lazarus was sick. But what difference would His presence there have made? This: it is impossible to escape the inference that had the Lord Jesus been there, Lazarus had not died—impossible not only because His words to the disciples plainly implied it, but also because of what other scriptures teach us on that point. The implication is plain: what the Lord unmistakably signified here was that it was inconsistent with His presence that one should die in it. It is a most striking thing that there is no trace of any one having died in the presence of the Prince of Life (Acts 3:15). And furthermore, the Gospel records show that whenever Christ came into the presence of death, death at once fled before Him! As to the non-possibility of any one dying in the presence of Christ, we have an illustration in connection with what took place in Gethsemane. When the officers came to arrest the Savior, Peter drew his sword and smote the high priest's servant, with the obvious intention of slaying him. But in vain. Instead of cleaving his head asunder he simply severed an ear! More striking still is the case of the two thieves who were crucified with Him: They died after He had given up His spirit! As to death fleeing at the approach of Christ we have a most remarkable example in the case of the widow's son of Nain. Here it was different than in the instances of Jairus' daughter and the brother of Martha and Mary. Each of these had appealed to Him but here it was otherwise. A man was about to be buried, and as the funeral cortege was on the way to the cemetery, the Lord Jesus approached, and touching the bier He said to the young man, "Arise," and at once "the dead sat up, and began to speak" (Luke 7:14, 15)! "And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe" (John 11:15). How perfect are the ways of God! If Martha and Mary had had their wish granted, not only would they (and Lazarus too) have been denied a far greater blessing, but the disciples would have missed that which must have strengthened their faith. And too, Christ would have been deprived of this opportunity which allowed Him to give the mightiest display of His power that He ever made prior to His own death; and the whole Church as well would have been the loser! How this should show us both the wisdom and goodness of God in thwarting our wishes, in order that His own infinitely better will may be done. This verse also teaches a most important lesson as to how the Lord develops faith in His own. The hearts of the disciples were instructed and illuminated gradually. There was no sudden and violent action made upon them. They did not attain to their measure of grace all at once. Their eyes were slowly opened to perceive who and what Christ was; it was by repeated manifestations of Divine power and human compassion that they came to recognize in Him a Messiah of a far higher order than what they had been taught to expect. John 2:11 illustrates the same principle: "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him."

And God deals with us in the same way. There is, in the development of our faith, first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. Compare the development of Abraham's faith through the increasingly severe trials through which God caused him to pass. "Nevertheless let us go unto him" (John 11:15). Lazarus was dead, and yet the Lord speaks of going to him. "O love, stronger than death! The grave cannot separate Christ and His friends. Other friends accompany us to the brink of the grave, and then they leave us. 'Neither life nor death can separate from the love of Christ'" (Burkitt). Lazarus could not come to Christ, but Christ would go to him. "Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellow-disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). No wonder that he said this to his fellow-disciples rather than to the Lord. Very melancholy was his utterance. Thomas was a man who looked on the dark side of things. Lazarus is dead, Christ is going to die, let us go and die too! And this, after the Lord had said, "I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep" (John 11:11)! How difficult is it for man to enter into the thoughts of God! Christ was going to Bethany to give life. Thomas speaks only of dying. Evident is it that he had quite failed to understand what Christ had said in John 11:9. How much of unbelief there is even in a believer! And yet we must not overlook the spirit of devotion which Thomas' words breathed: Thomas had rather die than be separated from the Savior; Though he was lacking in intelligence, he was deeply attached to the person of the Lord Jesus. "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). "This was the language of a despairing and despondent mind, which could see nothing but dark clouds in the picture. The very man who afterwards could not believe that his Master had risen again, and thought the news too good to be true, is just the one of the twelve who thinks that if they go back to Judea they must all die! Things such as these are deeply instructive, and are doubtless recorded for our learning. They show us that the grace of God in conversion does not so re-mold a man as to leave no trace of his natural bent of character. The sanguine do not altogether cease to be sanguine, nor the desponding to be despondent, when they pass from death to life, and become true Christians. This shows us that we must make large allowances for natural temperament in forming our estimate of individual Christians. We must not expect all God's children to be exactly one and the same. Each tree in a forest has its own peculiarities of shape and growth, and yet all at a distance look one mass of leaf and verdure. Each member of Christ's body has his own distinct bias, and yet all in the main are led by one Spirit and love one Lord. The two sisters Martha and Mary, the apostles Peter and John and Thomas, were certainly very unlike one another in many respects. But they all had one point in common: they loved Christ and were His friends" (Bishop Ryle). "Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already" (John 11:17). Christ did not correct the error of Thomas, but calmly left the truth to do, in due time, its own work. The reference here to the "four days" makes it evident that in John 11 we have something more than a typical picture of the spiritual condition of the nation of Israel. From a doctrinal viewpoint, the condition of Lazarus in the grave accurately portrayed the state of the natural man dead in trespasses and sins, a mass of corruption. It is true that Lazarus was a Jew, but "as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man" (Prov. 27:19). The third chapter of Romans shows plainly that the state of Israel was also the state of the Gentiles. The "day" here, as usually in this Gospel, signifies (in its deeper meaning) a thousand years. "Four days," had man been in the place of death—alienation from God—for there were exactly four thousand years from the fall of Adam to the coming of Christ. God allowed the awful state of man to be completely manifested before He sent Christ to this earth. "Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already." Note that this verse does not say "When Jesus came to Bethany, he found that Lazarus had lain in the grave four days already," but instead, "When Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already." The Holy Spirit had a reason for putting it so indefinitely, and that reason we have sought to show above. When "Jesus came" to this earth, "he," fallen man, had been "in the grave"—the place of death—"four

days already"—four thousand years. O the minute and marvelous accuracy of Scripture! "Now Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off" (John 11:18). There seems to be a double reason why this topographical reference is made here. First, it explains why the "many Jews" had come to Bethany to comfort Martha and Mary (John 11:19). Second, it shows how very near to Jerusalem the raising of Lazarus occurred. It was less than two miles from the headquarters of Judaism, within walking distance, almost within sight of the Temple. All room for excuse was thereby removed for any ignorance in the leaders of the nation as to the identity of the person of Christ. His last and greatest "sign" was given before many eye-witnesses almost at the very doors of the Sanhedrin. Thus in this seemingly unimportant detail the Holy Spirit has emphasized the deep guilt of those who were most responsible for rejecting Christ. "And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother" (John 11:19). And poor comforters they must have made. They are in view again in John 11:37. When they witnessed the tears of the Lord Jesus by the grave-side of Lazarus, they said, "Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?" While no doubt they looked upon Christ as a miracle-worker, it is clear they had no apprehension of the glory of His person—"this man" shows that. Furthermore, it never seems to have entered their minds that He was capable of raising the dead. How then could they "comfort" the sorrowing sisters? It is impossible for an unbeliever to minister real comfort to a child of God. God alone can bind up the brokenhearted. Only the Divine Comforter can speak peace to the troubled soul, and not knowing Him, an unsaved person is incapable of pointing another to the one Source of consolation and rest. "And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother." Mark here the over-ruling wisdom of God. By waiting four days before raising Lazarus, a much greater number witnessed his resurrection, and thus the miracle of Christ was more decisively authenticated, for it would be given greater publicity. The Hand which controls all things so shaped events that it was impossible for the Sanhedrin to discredit this last great "sign" of Israel's Messiah. Here then was a further reason for the "therefore" in John 11:6. God not only has a good reason for each of His delays, but generally a manifold reason. Many various ends are accomplished by each of His actions. Not only wicked but utterly senseless are our criticisms of His ways. "Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him" (John 11:20). This action was thoroughly characteristic of Martha. Even though the Lord Jesus was not yet come into the village (John 11:30), she advances to meet Him. The verses that follow show us something of the condition of her mind at this time. "But Mary sat still in the house." "It is impossible not to see the characteristic temperament of each sister coming out here. Martha—active, stirring, busy, demonstrative—cannot wait, but runs impulsively to meet Jesus. Mary—quiet, gentle, pensive, meditative, meek—sits passively at home" (Bishop Ryle). What marks of truth are these minor details! How evident that the same One who inspired Luke 10 moved John to record these little marks of character here! "Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died" (John 11:21). There are some who think that Martha spoke in a spirit of petulance, that she was reproaching the Lord for not having responded more promptly to the message sent Him while He was in Bethabara. But we think this is a mistake. Rather do we regard Martha's words as a sorrowful lament, the telling out the grief of her heart. Martha's words show plainly what had been uppermost in the minds of the sisters during those trying four days—note that Mary says almost the same thing when she met Christ (John 11:32). There was a strange mingling of the natural and the spiritual, of faith and unbelief in this statement of Martha's. She had confidence in Christ, yet she limited His power. She believed that her brother had not died, no matter how low he were, had Christ only been present; yet the thought never seems to have entered her mind that He was able to raise Lazarus now that he was dead. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" would well have suited her condition at that time. And how often it is appropriate for us! Alas, that it should be so. The Christian is a strange paradox; a dual

personality indeed. "Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." That which is reprehensible in this utterance of Martha is that she was making distance a limitation of Christ's power. And have not we often been guilty of the same thing? Have not we often envied those who were in Palestine during the time that the Word tabernacled among men? But now, alas, He is absent; and Heaven seems so far away! But it is not: it was not too far distant for Stephen to see right into it! But suppose it were; what then? Do we not have the precious promise of the Savior, "LO, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age"! But, says the reader, Christ is bodily absent. True, and that was what had exercised Martha. Yet it ought not; had not the Lord healed both the centurion's servant and the nobleman's son at a distance by His word! He had; but memory failed Martha in the hour of trial and suffering. Alas, that this is so often the case with us. "But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee" (John 11:22). It is this additional word which indicates that there was a different meaning in Martha's words of John 11:21 from Mary's in John 11:32. Surely Martha must have said what she did here without any deliberation. With characteristic impulsiveness she most probably uttered the first thoughts which came into her mind. And yet we can hardly conceive of one making such a statement if she knew Christ as God the Son. The word she used for "ask God" indicates that she did not recognize that Christ was the One in whom dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. In New Testament Greek there are two words for "ask." The first, "aiteo," signifies a familiar asking. The second, "eroteo," means a supplicatory petitioning. The one is suited to express the favor asked of the Creator by the creature, the other for a son's asking of the Father. The former is never used of Christ with the Father except here on the lips of Martha! It was a dragging down of Christ to the level of the prophets. It was the inevitable outcome of having sat so little at His feet listening to His words. "Jesus said unto her, Thy brother shall rise again" (John 11:23). These were the first words of the Lord Jesus now that He had arrived at the confines of Bethany. He was about to give "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (Isa. 61:3); but not yet did He specifically announce His gracious purpose. Instead, He first gave the broad and general promise, "Thy brother shall rise again," without announcing when or how. It is the Lord's way to draw out by degrees His grace in the hearts of His own. He said enough to encourage hope and strengthen faith, but not sufficient to exclude exercise of heart. Light is given us upon the great mysteries of life gradually. "Here a little and there a little." Faith has to be disciplined, and knowledge is imparted only as the heart is able to receive it. "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12) still holds good. Unto the Corinthians Paul had to say, "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able" (1 Cor. 3:1, 2). Alas that we are so dull and make such slow progress in the things of God. "Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24). Martha supposed that He was gently setting aside her implied request that He would "ask of God," and that He was pointing her forward to a future and far-distant hope. Poor Martha! As yet she had learned little from the Lord Jesus. She had nothing better than the common hope of Jews—the resurrection of the dead "at the last day." Does not this suggest another reason why the Holy Spirit tells us in John 11:18 that "Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem"—less than two miles away. Martha was still under the influence of Judaism! But these words of hers also contain a warning for us. Martha, like the woman at the well, understood not the nearness of the benefit. In each case, half despondingly, they put it into the future. To the Samaritan woman Christ said, "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him." To this she replied, "I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things." To Martha He had said, "Thy brother shall rise again," and she replied: "I know that he shall rise again in the

resurrection at the last day." Each had only the vague, inoperative idea of a future and final good; whereas He spoke to each of a present blessing. It is easier to believe things which are in the far off (which occasion us no exercise of heart!) than it is to appropriate now that which ministers comfort and strength for the present trial. It makes less demand upon faith to believe that in a future day we shall receive glorified bodies, than to rest now on the heartening assurance that, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength." "Jesus saith unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25). This was like what the Lord said to the woman at the well. When she had, by her word, postponed the blessing, He answered at once, "I am that speaketh unto you"; so now He says to Martha, "I am the resurrection, and the life." Here is something of vital importance for our souls. It is not simply that He corrected the vision of these women by turning them from the distant future to the immediate present, but that He fixes their eyes upon Himself! It is not future events but the Person of the Lord, ever present with us, that we need most to be occupied with. Strength, blessing, comfort, are imparted just so far as we are taken up with Christ Himself. "I am the resurrection, and the life." "See how the Lord proceeds to instruct and to elevate her mind; how graciously He bears with her passing fretfulness; how tenderly He touches the still open wounds; how He leads her from grieving over her brother to believe yet more fully in her Savior; how He raises her from dwelling on Lazarus dead, to repose implicitly in Him who is the Lord of life; how He diverts her from thinking only of a remote and general resurrection to confide in Him who is even at this present, the Resurrection and the Life" (Dr. G. Brown). So too does He remove our ignorance, help our unbelief, and bear with our peevishness. Wondrous condescension, matchless patience, fathomless grace! And how the realization of these should humble us, and cause us to blush for very shame! "Lord, increase our faith" in Thyself. "I am the resurrection, and the life." This is what He is, in His own peerless Person. What He would here press upon Martha was that all power resided in Himself. Soon she would witness a display of this, but in the meantime the Lord would occupy her with what, or rather who He was in Himself. Blessed, thrice blessed is it for the soul to lay hold of this sustaining and satisfying truth. Infinitely better is it for us to be occupied with the Giver than His gifts. But why this order: the resurrection and the life? For at least a threefold reason. First, this is the doctrinal order. In spiritual experience Christ is to us the resurrection before He is the life. The sinner is dead in trespasses and sins, in the grave of guilt, separated from God. He has his dwelling "among the tombs" (Mark 5:3). His first need is to be brought out of this awful place, and this occurs at his regeneration. The new birth is a passing from death unto life (John 5:24); it is the being brought on to resurrection ground. The same double thought of leaving the place of death and receiving resurrection life is found again in verse 25: "The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live." Lazarus in the grave, raised to life by the word of Christ, gives us a perfect illustration of God's mighty work of grace in the hearts of His elect. Second, This was the dispensational order. The Old Testament saints were all in the grave when He who is "The Life" came down to this earth. Therefore it is in resurrection power that they will know the Christ of God. But believers in Palestine at the time when the eternal Word tabernacled among men knew Him as the Living One, God manifest in the flesh. And yet it was not until after the Cross that they knew Him as such in the fullest sense of the word. It was not until the day of His own resurrection that He breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). It is the life of a risen and never-dying Savior which the believer now has as an inalienable and—eternal possession. Christ is the resurrection because He is the life, and He is the Life because He is the Resurrection. Third, This will be the prophetic order. When the Lord Jesus leaves His Father's throne and descends into the air, His people will be found in two great companies; by far the greater part will be (as to their bodies) asleep in the grave; the others will be alive on the earth. But "flesh and blood" cannot inherit the kingdom of God. The living saints will need to be "changed," just as much as the sleeping saints will need raising. Therefore to

the one Christ will be the resurrection, to the other the life. The two companies of believers are clearly distinguished in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, "The dead in Christ shall rise first; then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air." The "changing" of the living believers is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:51. It is to this "change" of believers who have not entered the grave that Romans 8:11 refers: "But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken (give life to) your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you." Marvellously full were these words of Christ, "I am the resurrection and the life." "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). This was brought in to show that what Christ had just spoken of was elective and not common to all men as such. He was referring to something peculiar to His own: "he that believeth" limits the first part of the verse to God's elect. The resurrection of unbelievers, not to "life" but to the second death, where, however they shall exist in conscious torment forever and ever, is mentioned in other scriptures such as Daniel 12:2; John 5:29; Revelation 20, etc. "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." The Greek here is very explicit and impressive. The verb, "though he were dead," is in the past tense, and with it is coupled a present participle, "yet shall he live," i.e. continue to live; but this, be it noted, is predicated of one who believes. How this word of Christ tells of the indestructibility of faith—its ever-living, never-dying character! Primarily, this was a message of comfort to Martha; it went beyond what He had said to her in John 11:23. First He said, "Thy brother shall rise again"; next He directed attention to Himself as "the resurrection and the life"; now He intimates that though Lazarus had died, yet, because he was a believer, he should live. "Because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:19) we regard as a parallel promise. "And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:26). At the close of the previous verse Christ had referred to physical resurrection, bodily life; here, He speaks of death in its ultimate sense. Revelation 20:6 repeats the same blessed truth: "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power." At the close of the previous verse the Lord Jesus had spoken of believers who had fallen asleep—they shall live. But here He speaks of living believers—they shall never die. The Lord had made the same assertion on a previous occasion: "If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death." "Believest thou this?" (John 11:26). Every Divine communication challenges the heart to which it is made. We understand Christ's "this" to include all that He had said in John 11:25, 26. "Believest thou this?" Have you really laid hold of it? How little we grasp that which has been presented to us. How little we enter into what we believe in a half-hearted and general way! The sequel (John 11:39) clearly shows that Martha had not really "believed" what Christ here said to her—a most searching warning for us. Much of what we thought we held is found to have made no impression upon us when the hour of testing comes. "She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world" (John 11:27). Most of the commentators are quite astray here. They look upon this utterance of Martha's as an evidence that the mists of doubt had now disappeared and that at last her faith had come out into the full sunlight. But what we read of in John 11:39 clearly refutes such a view, and what is before us here must be interpreted in harmony with her final words at the grave itself. How then are we to understand her utterance in John 11:27? Pressed as she was by the searching question in the previous verse, it seems to us that she fell back on a general answer, which affirmed her belief that the Lord Jesus was the promised Messiah. Having confessed Him as such, she at once went her way. She felt there was a depth to the Lord's words which she was quite incapable of fathoming. And here we must stop. Let the interested reader ponder the following questions to prepare him for the next lesson:— 1. Why did Martha leave Christ and seek out her sister, verse 28? 2. What does verse 30 reveal to us about Christ? 3. Why did Jesus weep, verse 35? 4. What is the meaning of the "therefore," verse 38? 5. Why were they bidden to remove the stone, verse 39? 6. What is the spiritual significance of verse 44? ENDNOTES:

[1] The only apparent exception is the case of Jairus\

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