

Chapter 21

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Many a man lives a long life through, thinking he believes certain universally received and well established things, and yet never suspects that if he were confronted by those things once, he would discover that he did not really believe them before, but only thought he believed them.

—Mark Twain, *Roughing It*

Nancy had never had so much money at her fingertips. Now, right when she had a chance to double it, indecision paralyzed her. Conscious of the cameras, Nancy managed to resist biting her nails, but perspiration wasn't optional. What would her husband, Hugh, advise? If only she could ask him. Near the front of the studio audience, his mouth moved like that of a fish in a school of other fish, but a roar swamped his voice. "Answer the question!" "Take the money!" A dozen variations on those themes blended into another wave of muddled noise from the audience, adding to her confusion. Should she risk tripping over the mystery question in the sealed box and losing everything, or should she settle for her

accumulated winnings? Then she imagined what her new life would be like if she answered correctly.

“Nancy Parker, you have five seconds to make your decision,” the host announced cheerily.

Waiting for Glory (John 11:1–57)

A life of faith is similar to that quiz show. Every challenge to our faith is an opportunity to “open the box” for God to work and thus build faith, which is our spiritual capital. Or we can settle for life as usual, and plateau. However, true faith contains no element of chance, and we have nothing of value to lose.

John 11 tells of a highly charged faith challenge. It happened shortly before Jesus’ crucifixion, and it forms the backdrop to His death and resurrection.

Jesus was on a ministry trip when word arrived that Lazarus, His good friend, was sick in Bethany. As Jesus responded, He interacted with several groups of people facing a tomb-shaped “box” that contained a body. Some were disciples; others were friends. A few folk had gathered to sit *shivah*. They considered the Jewish mourning custom their social responsibility. Another set resented Jesus’ intervention, and they reacted with hostility. For each group, Jesus’ actions and words challenged them to have deeper faith in Him. As we survey the crowd, we should ask which players we identify with. Most important, how is Jesus challenging us to grow in our faith?

When the gathered disciples heard the news, they were afraid (vv. 4–16). The rumbles of opposition to Jesus had grown ominous. If Jesus wasn’t careful, they could die by stoning or suffer another gruesome fate. They preferred to stay thirty miles from the epicenter that was Jerusalem, on the safe side of the Jordan river. “If Lazarus is asleep, he is going to wake up soon,” they reasoned. “So, you don’t need to go there, Jesus!” But Jesus called His loyal followers to deeper faith. His purpose was for God to be glorified and for their faith to increase (vv. 4, 15, 40, 42).

Why does God sometimes keep us waiting until the last minute before He responds? Why did Jesus wait two more days before going to Bethany? Like a friend withholding a long-awaited present, He seems to tease out our love until the last possible moment. The anticipation grows. When the gift is finally unwrapped, joy and amazement reach their peaks. When God responds at the last minute, His timing proves that He did it, and our faith and love grow. Jesus’ delay produced the maximum glory for God.

Stepping Stones of Faith

Enter Martha, a woman of faith.¹¹⁷⁹ She welcomed Jesus, confident that if He had been around, Lazarus would not have died because Jesus would have healed him. Others in the crowd, who were sitting *shivah*, shared her faith. “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?” (v. 37)

It is hard to fault even limited faith; after all, Jesus commended mustard seed faith. However, Jesus doesn’t let us settle with trusting Him to heal us, provide for us, protect us or perform other miracles. He used the death of Lazarus to take onlookers a step further. We can expect to encounter new, more challenging “boxes”—opportunities for our faith to progress. But we don’t like challenges, do we? Being stretched is uncomfortable.

Nonetheless, Martha reached out in faith: “Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You” (v. 22). Her faith in Jesus’ healing was a stepping-stone to greater faith. Jesus saw her reaching out, and He cheered her on. “Your brother will rise again” (v. 23). The implied challenge: “Martha, you believe in My healing power. Now trust Me to resurrect Lazarus.”

Martha’s response exemplifies another position we might take: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (v. 24). Like others of her time, Martha believed in resurrection.

The Old Testament says little about resurrection, though Daniel 12:2 and other writings show that Jesus’ contemporaries had a concept of it.¹¹⁸⁰ Martha had perused the books in the Jewish bookstore, and she had heard it on Radio Judea. Preachers had bellowed it from pulpits, and she had shouted “Hallelujah” and “Amen” to encourage them. She had read the stories about dead boys who had been raised by the prophets: Elijah in Zarephath and Elisha in Shunem.¹¹⁸¹ She had kept newspaper clippings about a widow’s son, whom Jesus had raised moments before he was buried in a tomb in tiny Nain.¹¹⁸² She had heard the flashy news of Jairus’ daughter, whom Jesus had lifted off her deathbed in Galilee.¹¹⁸³

Martha knew the names **Living God, Creator, and God of the spirits of all flesh**. Perhaps she had even heard Jesus say that the dead would hear His voice and live because “just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself” (John 5:25–29). Her doctrine was as sound as it could be.

This was different though. Martha said, “This is my brother and he hasn’t just died; he’s been dead four days. Mary and I wrapped his body in grave clothes and sealed it in that mountain tomb.” The nice Bible story had leapt from the book right into her living room. It beckoned Martha to get up from her recliner, become part of a new miracle, and go deeper in her faith.

It is not enough to hold religious opinions about life after death. If resurrection were just a doctrinal crutch to get through life and if the grave actually ended conscious existence, then it wouldn’t matter what we believe. Paul addressed such speculations, listing witnesses and concluding that resurrection is real: “Christ has been raised from the dead, the **first fruits** of those who are asleep” (1 Cor. 15:12–20). Resurrection refuses to be mere theory. Our eternal destiny depends on faith in Jesus’ historical resurrection. The miracle in Bethany prepared His followers to believe in that.

Each opportunity to grow in faith tends to come as a statement about God followed by a demonstration of that truth. Jesus said, “I am the **resurrection and the life**,” (v. 25). It was an invitation to step onto a solid rock of fact and to experience the results. When Jesus calls us to deeper faith, He does not point to things that we can have or to what He might do. No, He points to Himself. Jesus is the object of faith—not His miracles, provisions, or plans for us, but Him. Jesus is the only hope for eternal life. So, “he who believes in Me will live even if he dies” (v. 25).

Martha responded to His challenge, saying, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the **Christ**, the **Son of God**, even He who comes into the world” (v. 27). But would she put all her weight on her stepping-stone of established belief and cross into a new dimension of faith that lay beyond her present crisis?

A similar challenge faced those who had witnessed Jesus miraculously multiply food for a multitude.¹¹⁸⁴ He said, “I am the **bread of life**; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.” Judging from Jesus’ explanation, belief meant ingesting the very flesh of the **living bread**. Somehow, life flows from the **living Father**, via Jesus, to the believing partaker. Perhaps Jesus’ explanation was a reference to taking the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. Certainly, He emphasized how central to life faith should be.

The Resurrection and the Life

Gk.: *Hē anastasis kai hē zōē*
(John 11:25)

Bread of Life

Gk.: *Ho artos tēs zōēs*
(John 6:35, 48)

Living Bread

Gk.: *Ho artos ho zōn*
(John 6:51)

Living Father

Gk.: *Ho zōn patēr*
(John 6:57)

Going Deeper

Mary and Martha had no time to adjust their ideas; the demonstration had begun. Approaching the tomb, Jesus ordered, “Remove the stone” (v. 39). The words immediately tested their precarious-looking stepping-stones, which had been laid on a slender understanding of resurrection and of who Jesus was.

We can sense their paralysis when they said, “But Lord!” Like the quiz show audience, some bystanders might have shouted: “Open the tomb! Roll away the stone!” Others would have played it safe. Lazarus had been in the grave for four days. The implications of moving the stone were huge, yet someone had enough faith to obey Jesus.

We can make four observations about faith that is growing:

First, growing faith requires practical decisions. Faith is not just a theory or an opinion; it results in action and change. It does not settle for life as usual or allow fear of the unknown to win. In Bethany, someone strained and moved a heavy stone.

The call of Jesus includes enough practical applications to last a lifetime. We make every turn from sin believing that God offers something better than sinful earthly pleasure. Obeying His command to love one another requires faith that, even if others do not return our love, His love for us is enough. When we embrace His commission to “Go, even to the ends of the earth and make disciples,” we have faith that His purpose for our lives surpasses our own ambitions.

Second, deepening faith challenges common sense—in this case, the sense of smell. Bodies decay fast in a hot Mediterranean climate. It was the Jewish custom to visit a grave for three days after a burial, partly to ensure they had not buried a comatose patient. By the fourth day, decay would have set in, removing any doubt as to whether the spirit had left. Lazarus was dead. He had been dead for longer than the widow’s son or Jairus’ daughter; no one had buried them. Lazarus was already in the grave, and Mary and Martha’s hopes were dead too. What a stink there would be if they moved the stone.

Some ancient spectators at the faith-challenge game show might well have shouted, “Don’t open the tomb! Take the truth you already know and move on. Settle for Jesus as a nice man, a good teacher. Be grateful He’s a healer. Let’s develop our theory of a future resurrection, but we must not open the grave!” Common sense grimaced, urging Mary and Martha not to

open the tomb because “by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days!” (v. 39)

Third, it’s natural to want evidence. Our inclination is to assess the “contents” before we act. Now, it’s fine to gather facts, but the flow of evidence often runs dry before we are satisfied. At some point, Jesus calls time on our analyses. “You have all the evidence that you need. Take the step.” As faith deepens, we accept the point when we must open the box.

In the story, the crowd by the tomb witnessed Martha and Mary make their decision. In some people, perhaps an excitement rose. “Open the tomb. Jesus can do this.” As we face our faith challenges, words of encouragement strengthen us so that we can experience more of Jesus’ power.

One note of caution, though. There is a difference between faith and presumption. Faith challenges typically start with God speaking, and His voice is always consistent with Scripture. It helps to keep notes of what God says in each big decision so that we have something to refer to. Presumption has no record to point to.

Lastly, with a growing faith, we experience increased blessings. Martha believed in a resurrection, although it was a distant one. She had not considered resurrection in the here and now, made possible by the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. The disciples believed Jesus was extraordinary, yet Thomas settled for pessimism about a premature death (v. 16). However, as their faith deepened, they enjoyed more of God’s blessings—in the case of the sisters, they saw their brother restored to life.

Jesus looked on and said, “Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” (v. 40) Everyone saw God perform a mighty miracle. Despite their initial fears and low expectations, their faith grew and they witnessed more of God’s glory.

Compelling Evidence

“So, they removed the stone” (v. 41). Jesus prayed and then “cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come forth’” (v. 43). One commentator said that if Jesus had not specified “Lazarus,” all the tombs would have emptied of bodies, so authoritative was His command.

Just then, the crowd understood the words, “the **resurrection and the life**,” in the most down-to-earth way. They also witnessed a fulfillment of other names that speak of God’s power and might. It was a great miracle of

the **God who works wonders**.¹¹⁸⁵ When God snatched Lazarus back from death, He exercised His authority as the **God of all flesh, Lord both of the dead and of the living**, and the **Eternal God**.¹¹⁸⁶ The **Creator** and the **Author of life** re-created life and raised the already decomposing body of Lazarus. It was a foretaste of “the **last Adam**” becoming “a life-giving spirit”

Author of Life (1 Cor. 15:45). The strange sight of mummy-like Lazarus waddling stiffly from the tomb prepared onlookers to believe in Jesus’ own resurrection and to understand His oneness with the un-decaying King.¹¹⁸⁷ The **word of life** had issued a command to a dead man. The result spoke for itself.

The evidence convinced one significant group, while another group missed the point. “Many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done” (vv. 45–46). The first group understood the implications of the miracle: “Jesus raised a corpse, so He must be God.” The second group was so preoccupied with politics that they reported Jesus to the religious authorities. For them, Jesus’ earlier words proved true, even a resurrection would not sway some people.¹¹⁸⁸

Considering how compelling the raising of Lazarus must have been, the disciples’ reactions on the first Easter morning are interesting. Surely, they should have believed the reports of Jesus’ resurrection. Yet Mark said of some, “They were afraid.” Of others, he said, “They refused to believe it.” Of another group, he said, “They did not believe them either.” When Jesus came to the gathered disciples, He “reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed” (Mark 16: 8–14). Given what the religious and political leaders had done to eliminate Jesus, the disciples thought they would lose everything if they started claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. It was no light matter.

However, the experiences of seeing, touching, and hearing their risen Master were more convincing than secondhand reports. The disciples soon testified boldly to the resurrection. Their encounters with the risen Jesus propelled them like rocket fuel, and their eyewitness accounts form the basis for our own faith. Will we accept the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection? Our lives depend on it!

Eternal Life

Why is belief in the resurrection of Jesus a matter of life and death? Before Jesus' rendezvous with us, we are all spiritually dead and in various stages of decay. We have rotten thoughts, bad habits, decayed relationships, broken-down marriages, and decomposed families. The concepts that we absorb into our brains and the chemicals that we suck into our bodies corrode our lives. More seriously, without Jesus, sin separates us from the living God, and judgment follows death. Belief in Jesus' resurrection is essential if we are to live—to really live.

“If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Jesus saves us from death and gives us eternal life. “Eternal life means knowing Me and the Father who sent Me.”¹¹⁸⁹ Paul summarized the present and future dimensions of the new life: “For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (Col. 3:3–4). Eternal life is a quality of life in relationship with God. It begins the moment we accept Him and it continues forever. When we believe in Jesus' resurrection, we get a bonus—the assurance that Jesus has made us right with God and that He will raise our bodies too.¹¹⁹⁰ We are equipped to overcome sin and given the power for ministry.¹¹⁹¹ It is a gloriously abundant life.

Opening Other Graves

Much of the time, the Gospels give us a sense that Jesus was the most socially skilled and likeable guy around. However, occasionally He struck His own culture as offensively inappropriate. He had conversations with women of questionable repute, allowing one to cover His feet with tears, ointment, and kisses.¹¹⁹² He hiked unperturbed through a pig farm, vandalized a temple court, and even touched unclean lepers and a coffin—without gloves!

If anyone else had approached a funeral party and begun talking about faith and resurrection, burly men would have escorted that person from the room.

“Can't you see how distraught his sisters, Mary and Martha, are?”

“This is painful enough for us. Stuff your religious idealism!”

“What right do you have? For goodness sake, leave us alone to mourn.”

You and I would probably have heeded the early warnings and tiptoed around everyone's feelings, but Jesus knows exactly when it is right to slice through taboo. Many of His greatest miracles and most memorable messages unfolded in delicate moments. If He had not boldly broken several of the rules of His time, we would have no model for loving and accepting a sinner while clearly rebuking the sin. We would have no sense of how precious even the most infected of us are to Him. We would be unable to point to His power over a whole legion of demons. Jesus knows when to touch a tender heart, when to expose an unjust custom, and how to bring glory to God out of the darkest pits.

The raising of Lazarus was a high point in a string of miracles. It declared Jesus' authority over death. It paved the way for us to have faith in His own greater resurrection. It heralded His impartation of eternal resurrection life at the last trumpet to those who believe in Him. It gives us confidence that if Jesus can raise dead bodies, He can resolve our most entrenched and entangled situations. It showed that the impact of His salvation on our lives is limitless.

Where does human pain lie? Often, we keep it wrapped in bandages, buried deep within the walls of our hearts. One or two people might be mourning with us, reliving our memories. Frequently, the pain is a private, sealed subject. Even our closest friends and family members can't find the right words to say. For human pain to be healed, a qualified comforter must enter those dark places.

The story of Lazarus helps us to recognize Jesus for exactly who He is, and to welcome Him as He approaches the recesses of our lives. Don't be put off by His directness. His touch is life-giving. He can resuscitate dead dreams. He can restore relationships. He can open doors for those who are buried in dead-end jobs, or those who live under mountains of debt or regret. He is the one who revives dead wombs, turns mourning into gladness, and births new beginnings. Jesus does all of this because He is God.