

### Exegesis

**Vs. 38** – John tells us, “Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.” As mentioned in the explanation of vs. 33, it is difficult to settle on what the term “groaning” meant other than a strong and visceral emotion.<sup>1</sup> What, exactly, prompted this emotional response from Jesus? The Jew's seeming cynicism (vs. 37)?<sup>2</sup> The overall display of grief (vs. 33)? It is likely a mixture of many things. John himself does not explain Jesus' emotions. The thing that our faithful narrator wants his readers to know is that the Lord was very clearly upset. To put too fine a point on the reasoning behind Jesus' feelings is to miss the more important observation: *Jesus had feelings*. The Messiah was not some reticent and apathetic being as if he were cut from some cold piece of marble. He was as emotive and spirited as the rest of us.

Rather than bury the dead in the ground, John tells us that Lazarus' grave was a “cave” and that a “stone” lay upon the opening. The stone served a preventive function, keeping the body from being picked apart by scavengers.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Jews were known to bury their dead twice, once in a cave and again in a different place a year later after the body had completely decomposed.<sup>4</sup>

**Vs. 39-40** – Once arriving at Lazarus' tomb, Jesus ordered that the stone be removed. This caused quite a shock. Undoubtedly, everyone thought Jesus was going to the cemetery to mourn, and, instead, he's asked to open the grave! Martha's response is riddled with shock and disgust as she says, “Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.” On the significance of “four days,” see notes for vs. 17. Everyone knows that decomposition isn't a pleasant affair. Bodies that once were vibrant and full of life quickly become unrecognizable and grotesque within a few days. According to a first-century rabbinical document, a corpse was recognizable within three days; afterward, it was deemed “unidentifiable due to decay.”<sup>5</sup> The last thing that Martha wanted to do was to see the decaying remains of her beloved brother. Specifically, she mentions the stench. Unlike Egyptians, Israelites did not use embalming techniques.<sup>6</sup> They did not preserve the dead. Rather, they used strong aromatics to mask the smell of death. But no amount of perfume could conceal the reeking stink of a body

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<sup>1</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 342.

<sup>2</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> Keener (2003), 2:848.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Thompson (2015), p. 249, footnote 308.

<sup>6</sup> Carson (1991), p. 417.

that's been dead for four days. Furthermore, as anyone who's lost a loved one can attest, it is far better to remember who the deceased were when they were alive rather than see and smell what's become of their body. All that to say, Jesus commanded that Martha do the one thing she was *least* likely to do.

Far from rebuking Martha for disagreeing with him, Jesus lovingly responds, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" Even though these words do not show up in their previous conversation, they are supposed to remind Martha of her magnificent declaration of faith (vs. 27). Also, they ensure that everything is interpreted within the framework of God's glory (cf. vs. 4).<sup>7</sup> Martha believed in Jesus standing on the road; it was time to believe in him standing before the tomb. This was a crisis point for Martha, as it was for everyone. She would need to choose which reality she would believe. Was death the final authority? Or would the very embodiment of the resurrection (vs. 25) have the last word? She has already seen what death can do. Should she believe the voice of the Lord, she'll witness what God's glory can do.

**Vs. 41-44** – Apparently, Jesus' words convinced Martha because John tells us, "Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid." Notice that he gives no other description. Was there a smell, as Martha supposed? It is likely. But John does not wish to linger anymore on death. Instead, he immediately turns our attention to Jesus. And it seems the Lord thought this was the perfect time to give the public a small glimpse into his prayer life.

But what sort of prayer would Jesus pray at a moment like this? Would it be for the deceased? For the family members? For himself? Surprisingly, we find a prayer of *thanksgiving* for something that has *already* happened. Jesus, with eyes towards the heavens, says, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me." The prayer's content is characterized by gratitude. Gratitude for what, though? Because God "heard" Jesus' prayer. But what did he pray? No prayer had been recorded up to this point. We seem to be coming in at the tail end of a conversation between God and Jesus.<sup>8</sup> But, given what comes next, we can rightly assume that Jesus had requested for Lazarus to be resurrected.<sup>9</sup> That God would deny such a request from his Son is impossible as Jesus knows that his heavenly father hears him "always." Their bond is so intertwined that God gives whatever the Son requests.

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<sup>7</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 194, quotes R.H. Fuller, "Jesus lives in constant prayer and communication with his father. When he engages in vocal prayer, he is not entering, as we do, from a state of non-praying into prayer. He is only giving overt expression to what is the ground and base of his life all along."

<sup>9</sup> Morris (1995), p. 497.

Interestingly, Jesus explains his reason for praying aloud as he wanted those standing close to “believe that [God] has sent [him].”<sup>10</sup> As great as the miracle may be, it is not entertainment, nor is Jesus' prayer grandstanding. Both the resurrection and his conversation with God are *evidence* of Jesus' connection to the Father.<sup>11</sup> Far more important than believing that Jesus can raise the dead is acknowledging that he was sent by God. Whatever Jesus has done or will do is by the direction of the Father. In all things, even when standing outside the tomb of a dear friend, the Lord is subservient to God.

After finishing his prayer, John tells us that Jesus “cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.”<sup>12</sup> There is no séance. Jesus does not employ some unknown other-worldly language. Instead, he utters a simple, straightforward command. Apart from the one who said it and the person being told to “come forth,” there is nothing unusual about the words themselves. Even the fact that Jesus raised his voice is not strange. Like the prayer that preceded it, Jesus raised his voice for the crowds so they would hear exactly what he said.<sup>13</sup> It was not for Lazarus' benefit. He would've risen at a whisper. Though, as many have pointed out, had Jesus not specified who he was talking to, *all* the graves might've been emptied that day.<sup>14</sup> But Jesus raised his voice so the people would not soon forget how a dead man stepped out of his own tomb at *his* command (cf. 5:28-29).

Immediately after Jesus' command, John describes how “he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin.” Contrary to some commentators, the fact that Lazarus could walk at all is not as striking as it might first appear to be.<sup>15</sup> While some first-century Greek burial techniques would require that the body be wrapped tightly so that the legs and arms were firmly secure, a practice born from the superstitious belief that the dead would haunt the living if not restrained,<sup>16</sup> Jews expensively adorned their dead in flowing garments.<sup>17</sup> In fact, after loosely tying the extremities with linen

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<sup>10</sup> Carson (1991), p. 418, gives a practical application regarding public prayer when he says, “It is not foreign to the spirit of the passage to remark that public prayers, though like private prayers addressed to God, must be crafted with the public in mind as well.”

<sup>11</sup> Wright (1950), p. 260, “His life was a life of prayer. *We* [author's emphasis] have *occasional* [author's emphasis] moments of dependence upon the Father when we seek not our own will but His will—not our selfish requests, but His glory. Such moments were not occasional to Jesus.”

<sup>12</sup> Keener (2003), 2:849-850, “That he calls his name may recall 10:3: Jesus calls his own sheep by name, and leads them forth; that he raises him with his voice recalls 5:28-29, the future resurrection to which this points on a temporal, symbolic level (cf. 11:24-26).”

<sup>13</sup> Keener (2003), 2:849, explains that, given the accusation that Jesus was demon-possessed, the people may have mistrusted a silent prayer.

<sup>14</sup> Carson (1991), p. 418.

<sup>15</sup> Keener (2003), 2:850.

<sup>16</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 346; Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 195.

strips, Jews would lay their dead on a sheet twice the length of the body and then fold the sheet over the head and tuck the end under the feet.<sup>18</sup> So, this is not an instance of 'a miracle within a miracle'.<sup>19</sup> He could've easily shuffled, limped, or even hopped out of the tomb. However, that Lazarus was still somewhat encumbered is evidenced by Jesus' command to "Loose him, and let him go." Regardless, specificity regarding Lazarus' attire is most assuredly not the point. The fact that Lazarus is alive at all is the real takeaway.

But, as impressive as this moment is, John would've wanted his audience to compare this resurrection with Jesus' resurrection. Even though they were buried in the same manner (cf. 19:40-42), the two resurrections differ in two significant ways. Firstly, unlike how Lazarus came bound in the very thing he had been buried in, Jesus left his graveclothes behind (cf. 20:4, 7).<sup>20</sup> And secondly, Lazarus would die again, but Jesus rose from the grave never to die again (cf. Rom. 6:10). Sadly, Lazarus would need his graveclothes once more; Jesus wouldn't.

Carson's closing remarks on this section are worth repeating:

"Lazarus was called to a restoration of mortal life. Small wonder he groped blindly for the exit, and needed to be released from the graveclothes that bound him. Jesus rose with what Paul calls 'a spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15), leaving the graveclothes behind, materializing in closed rooms. Though his resurrected body bore the marks of his five wounds and was capable of eating and of being touched, it was raised with the power of endless life, the firstfruits of the resurrection at the end. Those who hear Jesus' shout on the last day will participate in his resurrection; the resurrection of Lazarus, occurring before that of Jesus, could only be a pale anticipation of what was yet to come. It was, in fact, a 'sign', rightly the climactic sign."<sup>21</sup>

While this has rightly become one of Christianity's favorite passages, it is worth being reminded that our hope is not tied to Lazarus' resurrection. If it were, we would need to die again someday. Instead, our hope is bound to Jesus' resurrection, where we'll never die again. "Death is powerful; but it is not all-powerful."<sup>22</sup> Only to the voice of the Messiah does death obey. For those who know Jesus and believe in his name, death will only take us once. And even that is subject to change (cf. 1 Thess. 4:17).

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<sup>18</sup> Carson (1991), p. 418; Thompson (2015), p. 250.

<sup>19</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 295.

<sup>20</sup> Keener (2003), 2:850.

<sup>21</sup> Carson (1991), p. 419.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson (2015), p. 251.

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 27

Text: John 11:38-44

In a story about Lazarus' resurrection, one would think that the resurrection itself would be told in great detail. But surprisingly, the actual event is told with such economy that it is clear John does not want us to focus on the miracle but on the Miracle-worker. As great and as famous as this moment may be, it is not the main point. The main point—and the purpose behind Lazarus' resurrection—is to demonstrate Jesus' connection to the Father. Far more important than believing that Jesus can raise the dead is acknowledging that he was sent by God.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: