

## Our Friend Lazarus Sleepeth

*"She hath done what she could: She is come aforetime to anoint my body to the burying"—Mark 14:8*

OUR reading this morning (John 11) brings us near to the end of the ministry of Jesus. The raising of Lazarus was a stupendous and unforgettable climax to his great work.

Yesterday, we left him, and his disciples, beyond Jordan in the place where John at first baptized. This morning we come to the time when he received an urgent message from his ardent and affectionate friends Mary and Martha.

He had gone there to escape capture by those Jews who sought his life. The two sisters must have been advised of his whereabouts, or they could not have sent the message concerning the serious illness of their brother.

Before we proceed further with the narrative, let us become better acquainted with the persons and Bethany the place where they lived.

Bethany is an Aramaic name signifying "house of the poor or afflicted one;" it is also thought to mean "the house or place of unripe figs."

It is a small town on the east slope of the Mount of Olives, about 1½ miles from Jerusalem on the road to Jericho. Today it is a small, wretched village, but its fig, olive, and almond trees give one at first a pleasant impression.

Jesus often lodged there, for it was the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, as well as of Simon the Leper, who was apparently given that appellation from having formerly been afflicted with leprosy.

Our reading for tomorrow opens with the record of the feast he provided, at which both Jesus and Lazarus were present, as well as Martha and Mary.

Another important reference to this town is recorded by Luke in 24:50-51—

"And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them.

"And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven."

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LAZARUS was a member of the family of Bethany, and brother of Martha and Mary. He was an object of deep affection not only to his sisters, but to Jesus, which speaks well for his character.

He was chosen for the notable honour of being raised from the dead. As we mentioned briefly, he was present at a supper given in honour of Jesus by Simon the leper at Bethany 6 days before the Passover.

The extent to which his restoration to life tended to bring new followers to Jesus so irritated the Jewish authorities that they plotted to put him also to death.

This is the last mention of Lazarus in Scripture. The plot to take his life does not seem to have been carried out, for no mention is further made of it. His name is Latin, which came from the Greek, and is the equivalent of "Eleazar" in Hebrew, meaning "God Helps."

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NOW let us meet Martha. Her name is Aramaic and is supposed to mean "lady." Luke records an interesting and noteworthy incident in Luke 10:38-42, which is well worth reading at this time—

"Now it came to pass, as they went, that they entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house."

(What a glorious privilege and divine honour that was—to have Jesus as a guest in her home!)

"And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.

"But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said,

"Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me.

*"And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:*

*"But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."*

Nothing is said of Martha's reaction to this rebuke by Jesus, but she must have taken it in the manner stated by Solomon in Prov. 9:8—

"Rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee."

Much has been said about this illuminating event. Some have taken Martha's part as only being reasonable with such an honoured guest, and that Mary should have waited until after the meal to talk to Jesus.

Then there are those who sympathize with Martha and say that she was a practical and sensible serving woman, and Jesus was too severe with her. But we must remember that Christ's life was a teaching life, and he always took every opportunity that arose. It is well, therefore, to look at the teaching he employed. The position of the Martha class is one of social interest. She was interested in Christ's presence in her home and wanted to show her appreciation by a lavish display of hospitality.

*Mary's was a spiritual interest—an interest centred in the Truth—an interest in what Christ had to say about his mission, and the things pertaining to salvation.*

They were both right in what they were doing. It was necessary to provide food for Jesus, but Martha was too careful and troubled about it. I think we would all be exercised in the same manner if he should be our guest. But it should not be overdone.

**Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, is representative of those who choose the one thing that is needful, and place it above all other things.**

It is that good part that will not be taken away when all temporal things will vanish like a dream.

Mary's name is equivalent to Miriam in the Hebrew.

The characteristics of the two sisters comes out strongly at the supper held in the home of Simon the leper. In John 12:2, it is stated that "Martha served," but in v. 3 John says—

"Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair, and the house was filled with the fragrance."

Mark gives more detail regarding this event, and adds the words of Jesus (14:8-9)—

"She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying.

"Verily I say unto you, Whosoever this Gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her."

*What a beautiful and eloquent tribute! It was an act of rare devotion and spiritual understanding, testifying both to her gratitude and to her sense of the high dignity and destiny of him whom she honoured—*

*"She is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying."*

But regardless of the difference in character of these two sisters, it is worthy to note in our reading (John 11:5) that—

"Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus."

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THE close attachment that Jesus held towards this family is emphasized in the message the two sisters sent to him when Lazarus was taken seriously ill (v. 3)—

"Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick."

There was no request that he come at once. We would therefore surmise that because Jesus loved him, they must have thought that the mere statement regarding his illness would be sufficient.

But Jesus did not go at once. He remained two days where they were staying. Then he suggested that they go again into Judea. This must have seemed strange to the disciples, because they had fled from Judea to escape danger because of the continued persecution.

They reminded him of this fact, but he answered—

"Are there not 12 hours in the day? If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world.

"But if a man walk in the night he stumbleth, because there is no light in him."

Bro. Roberts explains this parabolic answer in the following manner—

*"A man's day is his appointed time. Some men have no appointed time, like the cattle. But where there is a time appointed, he is safe till it is past. His day has 12 hours.*

*"Christ was several times in danger, as we have seen, but it came to nothing 'because his hour was not yet come.'*

*"So, it is with all who belong to him. They cannot be prevailed against till their work is done. This gives peace in the presence of danger."*

It is not recorded whether the disciples understood this statement of Jesus, or whether he explained it to them. However, it was characteristic of him to speak to them in this manner. After that he saith unto them—

"Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.

"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. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.

"And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe. Nevertheless, let us go unto him."

Prior to this Jesus had said—

"This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby."

Here again Jesus was speaking in language of figure. Why did he speak thus? It was apparently his method of causing the disciples to think for themselves.

The death of Lazarus was not a finality, for it was to be interrupted shortly, and that is why Jesus spoke of him sleeping. And that is why Paul spoke in the same manner in 1 Thess.—

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." (1 Thess. 4:14).

The fact is that Jesus deliberately waited for Lazarus to die. But why did he say that he was glad that he was not there?

Is it not true that if he had been there, he would have been requested to cure Lazarus. Then he would not have died, and he would not have had the opportunity for displaying God's mighty power of resurrection which later followed.

*Why did he say he was glad for their sakes that he was not there, to the intent that they might believe? Did they not already believe from the great works he had done in their presence many times?*

Yes, they did, but there were thousands who did not. And not only that, but as Jesus approached the end of his ministry, he began to do unusual things for the disciples in order to build up their courage for the great trial that lay in store for them. We remember, even after all this, "They all forsook him and fled."

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WHEN they arrived in Bethany, they found that Lazarus had been in the grave, or tomb, four days, and that many of their friends had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them. At this point it is interesting to note the action of the two sisters when they heard that Jesus had arrived—

"Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him.  
"But Mary sat still in the house."

And now the situation was reversed with regard to Martha and Jesus, for it was she who reproved Jesus for not coming sooner—

"Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died."

This was quite true, and Jesus understood it well, for his delay in coming was planned, but Martha did not at this time understand the situation.

It is apparent that Martha did not mean that death would not have occurred if Jesus had been there; but if he had come sooner, he would have healed her brother's illness.

But let it be noted carefully that Martha did not despair, for she added—

"But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee."

However, she did not yet know that her brother was to be raised within an hour, for when Jesus said, "Thy brother shall rise again," she replied:

"I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

But Jesus had intended that she would comprehend his statement in the same manner as when he spoke to his disciples, when he had said—

"I go that I may awake him out of sleep."

Jesus tried again to clear the situation regarding Lazarus, by saying—

"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

Martha's confident response was typical of all who believe as she believed, and it is essential that we all hold the same confident faith, for, says Paul in Heb. 3:14—

"For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end."

What was Martha's response? —

"Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world."

Even up to this point, she did not grasp the idea to which Jesus was leading up with reference to her brother. The conversation all took place somewhere outside of the town of Bethany, for we read (v. 30)—

"Now Jesus was not yet come into the town but was in that place where Martha met him."

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MARTHA then hastened home, and called Mary to one side, and spoke to her secretly, saying—

"The Master is come, and calleth for thee."

Mary hurried away, and said nothing to those who were with her, and they thought she had gone to the grave to weep there, but she was on her way to see Jesus, and when she reached him, she fell at his feet and repeated Martha's greeting—

"Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died."

While she was speaking, she was weeping, and so were those who had followed her. In such circumstances, no one can console the bereaved who have lost the association of a loved one. All they can do is what Paul said in Rom. 12:15, "Weep with them that weep."

*It was too much, even for the Son of God who loved these people, so that he, too, wept with them.*

But this sad drama was nearing its end, and Jesus asked them where they laid him. The answer was brief: "Come and see."

On the way to the grave, someone said—

"Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?"

They were right—he could have done so, but as we have seen this situation was planned, and they were about to witness the glory of God, by which the Son of God was to be glorified thereby.

When they reached the grave, Jesus requested that they remove the stone that covered the opening of the cave.

Martha, still unable to grasp the significance of the momentous event that was transpiring, expressed her concern at Jesus' request, because of the condition of the body after 4 days in the tomb.

The answer of Jesus must have thrilled Martha—

"Did I not tell you that if you have faith you will see the glory of God."

When the stone was taken away, Jesus prayed briefly—

"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."

His words were few and expressive, reminding us of what Solomon said in Eccl. 5:2—

"God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore, let thy words be few."

This calls to mind what brother Roberts said in the Ecclesial Guide about prayer in our meetings—

*"Let prayer be to God alone—one brother leading the rest in thanksgiving and supplication to His Name. And let the subject matter of each prayer be appropriate to the occasion; so that God may be glorified, and all may be edified."*

Going back to the grave, we hear Jesus say with a loud voice—

"Lazarus, come forth!"

It was not the loud voice that restored life to him, but the power of God operating through Jesus.

It was the work of a moment or, as Paul expressed it, "In the twinkling of an eye." Therefore, Lazarus awoke, finding himself alive and better, and came forth in his grave clothes, and his face tied with a napkin as was the manner in effect at that time. Jesus said—

"Loose him and let him go."

This great work of God in restoring Lazarus to life produced a two-fold result. First—

"Many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him."

But there were some of a different type, who went and told the Pharisees what things Jesus had done. This roused their merciless anger to such an extent that the chief priests and Pharisees convened the Council and agreed together to put him to death.

"Jesus therefore walked no more openly among the Jews; but went thence unto a country near to the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim, and there continued with his disciples."

In the meantime, Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary returned home with rejoicing. It is therefore our earnest prayer that the consideration of this chapter will leave such an impression on our minds that we too will return home "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."

— G.A.G. Taken from December 1965 Berean

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