

# LAZARUS HAS DIED

The raising of Lazarus marks the pivotal and climactic scene in the first half of John's Gospel and looks forward to the ultimate scene of the entire Gospel, the resurrection of Jesus. Despite Lazarus's familiarity in Christian teaching and preaching, very little is known about him. In fact, he does not appear in any Gospel except John; and, even in John, he only appears in chapters 11–12.<sup>1</sup>

We do know that the name Lazarus was a Greek form of the Aramaic name Eleazar, which means "God helps."<sup>2</sup> Although he never spoke in John's narrative, Lazarus was loved by Jesus (John 11:3,5,36) and as Jesus's friend (v. 11). Mary and Martha appear only twice outside of John 11. Mary sat at Jesus's feet and was affirmed for "the right choice" in Luke 10:38-42. She also anointed Jesus's feet in John 12:1-8. In both accounts Martha fulfilled the more traditional female role of preparing the meal.

Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived in Bethany. Ancient Bethany, the present-day Arab village of El-Azariya (taken from the name Lazarus), was situated on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, less than two miles from Jerusalem. A contemporary local tradition touting a tomb as the actual site of Lazarus's resuscitation could be reliable.<sup>3</sup>

## THE IMPACT OF LAZARUS'S DEATH ON MARY AND MARTHA

These siblings loved each other and loved Jesus deeply. The grief of the sisters for their brother's illness and eventual death provide the catalyst for the whole narrative.

Although many Christians can sympathize with the sisters' grief, the cultural differences blind us to the devastating impact Lazarus's death would have had on them. In first-century Judaism, a woman's honor hinged on the prominent male in her life. Prior to marriage, honor was drawn from her father. After marriage, it was contingent on her husband. In the absence of a living father, husband, or a male child, a woman relied on her brother.<sup>4</sup>

Since no other male relatives are mentioned, Mary and Martha's access to honor, property, security, and livelihood was likely embedded in Lazarus. With his death, they lost not only their closest relative, but all the things that matter in a male-dominated world.

## FIRST CENTURY BURIAL PRACTICES

In Jewish burial practices, the deceased person's eyes are shut, the mouth bound, and the body washed and anointed with spices. The spices worked to counteract the

odor that would result from the rapid decomposition of a body in the subtropical Mediterranean climate. The body was then wrapped in prepared cloths and placed in a tomb. Finally, a large rock sealed the tomb. After a longer period, the bones placed in a bone box called an ossuary.<sup>5</sup>

The practice of wrapping the body in grave clothes highlights a striking contrast between the resuscitation of Lazarus and Jesus's resurrection. At Jesus's command, Lazarus came out of the tomb "bound hand and foot with linen strips and with his face wrapped in a cloth" (v. 44). John's portrayal of the resurrection of Jesus, however, indicated that no one had to untie Jesus. The grave clothes were left behind and provided proof that Jesus was neither unwrapped nor was the body carried off. In fact, the only explanation was that Jesus's body had passed right through the wrapping (20:5-7).<sup>6</sup>

## DEAD FOUR DAYS

Jesus's delay demands explanation. Twice John stated that Lazarus had been dead for four days by the time Jesus arrived (11:17,39). Jesus intentionally delayed in order that four days might pass before his arrival in Bethany. He did this so that He and the Father might be glorified. But why not go immediately and either heal Lazarus's illness or raise him after one, two, or even three days? Wouldn't God be glorified in that as well?

Underlying the story is the Jewish belief that the soul lingered around the body for three days after death, hoping to re-enter. When the body began to decay and smell, the soul departed.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Jesus waited until after the third day when Mary, Martha, and the others at Bethany would have given up all hope that somehow Lazarus might come back to life. Thus, Jesus's miracle displayed the power and glory of God in the greatest possible manner. Furthermore, the story validated Jesus's power to raise the dead to life in this age and in the age to come.

1. The theory that the poor man named Lazarus in Luke's parable about the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is the same Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead in John 11 seems unfounded. The fact "that the name Lazarus [Eleazar] was the third most popular male name among Palestinian Jews" would explain why more than one character in the New Testament might bear the name (Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 174).
2. "Lazarus" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*.
3. Carl Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 213-14.
4. Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 48-50.
5. This description of Jewish burial practices is drawn from Craig Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, 14-15 and "Burial of Jesus" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*.
6. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 689.
7. *Leviticus Rabbah* Midrash on Leviticus 15:1-2 cited in Craig Evans, *Jesus and the Ossuaries*, 14-15.