

# The Dead Shall Rise: A City-Wide Prayer and Fasting Initiative

*It's Never Too Late* (John 11:1-44)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC English Service on April 6, 2025

## Introduction

- ❖ We're currently preaching through a sermon series in conjunction with over 150 other churches across the city of Houston. It's a part of this prayer and fasting initiative called *Awaken Houston*. Over this Lenten season, over the 47-days before Easter, we're challenging members to commit to a season of daily prayer and fasting – asking the Lord for a spiritual awakening, especially for those in our lives who are far from God. What we desperately want is to see their dead hearts made alive.
  - **That's why we've been preaching through all the biblical passages where a dead person is raised back to life.** Seeing God's power on display – defeating death itself – gives us hope that no one is too far gone. That it's never too late for someone to come alive. Now the first time the dead was raised involved Elijah and the widow of Zarephath's son. The second time was Elisha and the Shunammite woman's son. The third time involved Jesus and the widow of Nain's son. The fourth was Jesus and Jairus's daughter. **Now this is the fifth instance in Scripture.** Next to Jesus's own resurrection, this is the most well-known episode. This is the raising of Lazarus.
  
- ❖ Now in every episode, a man of God raises the dead. But this instance, in John 11, stands out as the most personal. All those other episodes involve raising the dead child of an acquaintance or a complete stranger. **But this time, it was deeply personal.** Lazarus was a close friend who had died, and Jesus was personally grieving. Think about it. **He knows what it's like to lose a loved one to a life-threatening illness.** He understands the profound pain, the heart-rending agony, the debilitating grief that accompanies such loss.
  - That's what makes this morning's passage so relevant. Many of you have experienced a similar kind of loss. **You've been bereaved of a loved one in your life. You've endured the bitter taste of grief and suffering.** You know this all too well.
  
- ❖ Now, for the rest of you, perhaps you've been spared the pain of having to bury a close friend or relative. **But the uncomfortable truth is that it's all in due time. One day, you'll be sitting in the funeral service of a loved one.** God forbid it be your child's. It's likely to be your grandparents' and then your parents'. One day, that funeral will be for a sibling or good friend. Eventually for your spouse.
  
- ❖ And it's not only their physical death you'll grieve. **For some of your family and friends, you're concerned for their soul.** You fear that, one day, you'll be mourning their fate beyond the grave. They're far from God now, and it'll only get worse after death. They'll be eternally separated from God's love and grace. They'll suffer under the weight of eternal condemnation.
  - **Bottom line, all of us need to accept the harsh reality that life in the flesh – life in this present age – will be marked by grief and loss.** No matter how tightly you hold onto these relationships, death will inevitably tear them apart. That's life in this Genesis 3 world.

- ❖ But that's why I'm thankful for John 11. **Because it's a needed reminder that our suffering does *not* take place under the indifferent gaze of an unsympathetic God.** One who can't comprehend our pain and agony. No, we're reminded that Christ has walked in our steps. His road to Calvary was marked by hardship, rejection, suffering, and death.
  - **And that road included seeing a loved one get sick and eventually die of that illness.** As we walk through this story, let me draw out four lessons. The first takes place in talking with his disciples (vv1-16). The second, when he converses with Martha (vv17-27). The third, when he addresses her sister Mary (vv28-37). And the fourth, when Jesus turns his attention to their brother Lazarus (vv38-44).

### Lesson One: Jesus and the Twelve

- ❖ So let's turn our attention to vv1-16 and consider our first lesson: ***Loving others doesn't mean always shielding them from suffering.*** That's one of the hardest lessons to learn. Our instinct is to protect those we love. To spare them from pain and shield them from suffering. **But what we'll see in these verses is that God can let you suffer (even when it's in his power to prevent it). And yet at the same time, he can call you his beloved.**
- ❖ **Let's see how these realities come together by first considering the characters.** In v1, we're introduced to a family in the town of Bethany. There were three siblings: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. This is their first appearance in John's Gospel. V2 says this is the same Mary who anointed Jesus with oil and wiped his feet with her hair. That episode doesn't actually occur until later in John 12. And this is the same Martha and Mary who hosted Jesus and the Twelve for dinner in Luke 10:38-42. They appear to be **a kind-hearted family and a family of devoted disciples.** And this is **a family that Jesus dearly loves.** His love is communicated through his actions in this chapter, but it's also stated outright in v5, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*"
- ❖ But what these verses highlight is that, right now, this is **a family facing sickness and suffering.** Lazarus is gravely ill. In v3, the sisters send word to Jesus, saying, "*Lord, he whom you love is ill.*" Now back in chapter 10:40, we learn that Jesus is currently residing across the Jordan, where John used to baptize. Commentators estimate that, from Bethany, it would've taken at least a day for a messenger to bring that word to Jesus.
  - So when Jesus gets this message that *the-one-whom-he-loves* is gravely ill and when you read in v5 that Jesus loved this family of kind-hearted, devoted disciples – you'd expect v6 to say something like, "So, Jesus immediately packed up and made a beeline for Bethany." He could've been there the next day. But that's not what it says.
- ❖ Let's read vv5-6, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*" **I love you, Lazarus. So, I'm going to stay put two days longer.** I'm not going to rush over to Bethany. Lazarus, I'm going to let you die. Martha, I love you. Mary, I love you. So I'm going to let you grieve the loss of your brother. **I'll let you suffer, and yet I still call you beloved.**

- ❖ **Friends, if you don't have the categories in your theology to reconcile God's love for you and God's will for you to suffer, then I have no idea how you stay Christian.** There is just too much suffering in this world – too much suffering in the lives of kind-hearted, devoted disciples of Jesus – to *not* feel this tension.
  - And v6 only muddles things. Why would Jesus delay? Why wouldn't he rush to his friend's side, knowing he has the power to heal? But do you see? **This delay in v6 will only confuse – if you're operating under the assumption that loving someone means always shielding them from suffering.** It's only confusing if you believe love will always compel you to protect loved ones from any pain.
  
- ❖ **But ask experienced parents, and they'll tell you that one of the hardest lessons they had to learn was to pull back.** As their children grew older, they had to release control, to stop coddling their children, to allow them to experience the pain of loss. As they grow older, our kids need to learn that life can be cruel; that sometimes the sick don't get better; that death is an inevitable part of life.
  - **Parents can love their children deeply and yet purposely let their kids experience pain.** They can choose *not* to shield their kids from all suffering. Because they know it will stunt their growth. **Now if that makes sense for earthly parents, how much more so for our Heavenly Father?**
  
- ❖ If you want to know why Jesus delayed, just look at v4. When he heard Lazarus was ill, Jesus said, *"This illness does not lead to death (meaning it won't end there). It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* And look down in v15. He tells his disciples he's glad he wasn't there to prevent Lazarus from dying, *"so that you may believe."*
  - In other words, Jesus's delay doesn't suggest an indifference towards human grief and suffering. **His delay is a delay of love.** According to Jesus, loving others means wanting more for them than simply sheltering them from suffering. **Loving others means wanting them to see the glory of God and to be strengthened in their faith – even if, at times, that might involve pain.**
  
- ❖ **I realize some of you have experienced disappointment with God.** He took much too long in responding to your prayers. Or like in our passage, even after all your pleading, he still let your loved one die of that sickness, even as he has all the power to heal.
  - I don't presume to know the mind of God. I can't explain the why for all your suffering. **But, based on this text, I'm confident to say that it doesn't mean you're any less loved by Christ.** I hope, one day, you'll be shown how the Son of God was glorified through it all and how your faith (or someone else's faith) was strengthened.

## **Lesson Two: Jesus and Martha**

- ❖ That goal of strengthening faith is clearly on Jesus's mind when he encounters Martha in v17. Let's consider our second lesson: ***Believing in the resurrection is not the same as believing Jesus is the resurrection.*** In other words, it's not just about believing in the concept of resurrection. It's about personally believing in Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

- ❖ Look at v17. It says, when they arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead and buried for four days. Look at what Martha says to Jesus when she sees him in v21, “<sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”” Now at first glance, that sounds like a complaint. **Like Martha is saying, “If you had only been here, my brother would still be alive. So where were you, Lord?”** That’s what v21 sounds like.
  - But in v22, she still expresses faith in the Lord – that whatever he asks from God, he will receive. Now there’s no reason to assume that she expects Jesus to resurrect her brother. But she still had faith.
  
- ❖ It’s important to place those two verses together and to ask if complaining to God is compatible with having faith in God. **Well, from Martha’s lips, we see that it’s possible to feel both things towards God – frustration and faith – both at the same time.**
  - Have you felt like Martha? Have you ever wondered, “Where were you, Lord?” Where were you when my child fell ill? Where were you when my spouse got the cancer diagnosis? Where were you when they succumbed to their sickness? If only you were there. If only you had been there, Lord.
  
- ❖ Have you ever uttered words like that? Words like Martha’s? You’re not alone. Read the Psalms of Lament (e.g. Ps 6; 13; 88). Where the psalmists are weeping, expressing grief, frustration, even complaints to God. But they never stop believing.
  - That’s the difference between **godly complaining and ungodly grumbling**. The psalmists complain, the prophets complain, Martha complains – they all complain to God, but they don’t grumble. **Grumblers complain about God. The godly complain to God in the context of faithful prayer.**
  
- ❖ Let’s keep reading in v23. “<sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”” Her theology is sound. **She holds to the orthodox view of her day that taught a future end-time resurrection of the dead, marking the end of this age.** Martha believed that on that final day, her brother will rise again – and to glory because of his faith in Jesus as the Christ.
  
- ❖ That’s good theology. But having good theology is not the same as having saving faith. **There’s a difference between believing in the idea of a resurrection and believing that Jesus is the resurrection.**
  - That’s Jesus’ point in v25, “<sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”” **Jesus is challenging Martha to move from an abstract belief in a theological concept to a personal belief in him – as the very source and power of resurrection life.**
    - Knowing that this present age will come to a cataclysmic end and result in a final resurrection is one thing. But having the confidence that you’ll be part of the resurrection unto eternal life – all because of Jesus – that’s something else.

- ❖ You could say the same thing about the gospel in general. You can be taught that Jesus is Lord, that he died on a cross for sinners, that he rose again, and offers forgiveness and eternal life. You can affirm these truths. You can have good theology. That's one thing.
  - But do you believe this? **Do you believe in Jesus – as *your* Lord; as the one who died for *your* sins, who rose again for *your* salvation, who has forgiven *you* and given *you* eternal life?** Being able to recite the truths of the gospel in a baptism interview is good but not enough. Believing there will be a resurrection of the dead is good but not enough. **You have to believe Jesus *is* the resurrection. Only through personal faith will you join him in the final resurrection.**
    - This is why we need to reflect on the words of Jesus – calling himself the resurrection and the life. **We need to reflect on whether or not we're ready to face death – the death of someone we know or even our own.**

### Lesson Three: Jesus and Mary

- ❖ I know it's not a pleasant thought. It's not fun to think about death. In fact, it can be really upsetting. But just know that Jesus felt the same way. Let's look now at vv28-37 and Jesus's encounter with Mary and other mourners. This is the third lesson for us to draw: ***Being upset and grieving the reality of death are right responses.*** You have every right to be upset when death takes away the ones you love.
- ❖ Look at v32. Martha calls for Mary. *“Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.””* Now, like with Martha, this is another example of godly complaint. Notice how Jesus responds in vv33, *“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.”*
  - That phrase *“deeply moved in his spirit”* is interesting. The Greek expression refers to the snorting of horses. **When applied to humans, it's a way to convey anger or indignation.** So Jesus was angry. He was upset and greatly troubled.
- ❖ But what was he upset about? **Apparently, Jesus was deeply moved and upset by the grief and sadness around him.** The family he loved was grieving. Many had traveled from Jerusalem to share in their mourning. V33 says that Jesus saw Mary and other mourners weeping, and that's when he was deeply moved in his spirit – that's when he got upset.
  - **He was angry at sin and all its tragic consequences.** Sin introduced sickness and death into God's good creation. And ever since, they've wrecked so much havoc in the world and caused so much suffering. Jesus was angry at the reality of death – at how it steals away our loved ones. He was upset.
- ❖ **Have you ever felt that kind of anger towards death?** Every time I'm at a funeral where there's an open casket – where you can pay your last respects to the body of the deceased – every time something about it feels wrong. You see that person you know laying there with no life in them. It feels wrong. This is not the way it's supposed to be! Death is a cruel enemy. Death is upsetting, and Jesus felt the same.

- ❖ Now keep reading to see how Jesus reacts when he sees where his friend has been laid. Look at v34, “<sup>34</sup>And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus wept. <sup>36</sup>So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!””
  - **So the same realities that made Jesus upset also made him grieve. He wept as he witnessed the realities of sickness and death.** Now the verb here is different than the word describing the weeping of Mary and the Jews back in v33. Their weeping was the typical wailing and bitter weeping that you’d expect in a funeral procession.
  
- ❖ But when it says “*Jesus wept*,” it means he shed tears. He wasn’t wailing like the rest of them, thinking he’ll never see his friend again. No, he knew what he was about to do. But the point is that the same realities that prompted his anger elicited his grief.
  - **What we learn is that being upset and being sad are the right responses to the realities of sickness and death.** For some of you, sickness and death are ever present realities – for you or for a loved one. Just know that the Lord has felt the same.
  
- ❖ That’s the mystery and the beauty of the Incarnation. The immutable, impassible, infinite God of the universe became human. **In the person of Jesus, God shared our emotional state.** He felt the same mix of anger and sadness that you feel. **He knows how you feel.** “<sup>15</sup>For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup>Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Heb 4:15-16)

#### **Lesson Four: Jesus and Lazarus**

- ❖ I realize some of you are in a time of need. You’re putting your hope in a second opinion. You’re putting your hope in an experimental drug or procedure. You’re putting your hope in the mercy of God to answer your prayers for healing. Don’t lose hope in those things. Keep praying for healing and keep pursuing treatments for yourself or your loved ones. **God’s healing touch is, more often than not, felt through the hands of medical professionals.**
  - But, at the same time, I feel compelled to remind you of our highest hope. It’s what Jesus demonstrated in vv38-44. In our fourth lesson, we’re reminded that ***looking forward to the resurrection of the dead is our highest hope.***
  
- ❖ Look back at v43. Jesus tells them to roll away the stone in front of Lazarus’s tomb. They comply, and then he prays to the Father – asking that what he’s about to do will strengthen everyone’s faith. “<sup>43</sup>When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” <sup>44</sup>The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.””
  - **Some have remarked that it’s a good thing Jesus used Lazarus’s name –** otherwise all the tombs would’ve given up their dead that day. That’s the kind of power and authority invested in Jesus’s words.

- ❖ By what he did that day – by resurrecting Lazarus – Jesus provided a powerful illustration of what he would accomplish on that first Easter morning. **And now that he has defeated death – now that he is risen – this passage serves as an illustration of what we, who trust in Jesus, will experience in the final resurrection.** When the Lord returns, in a loud voice, he'll command us to “come out,” and we'll rise in glory to be with him forever.
  
- ❖ If you look back at v11, you'll notice how Jesus describes the death of his friend. *“He said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.”* There's good reason why Christians have always preferred to use “falling asleep” as a euphemism for death (cf. Lk 8:52; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor 15:6, 18). That's why, when believers die, it's common for us to say that they fell asleep in Christ.
  - Because for those who are in Christ, death is like sleep. It's only temporary. **Just as sleep eventually leads to an awakening, death eventually leads to a resurrection.** That's why Christians have no need to fear death. Dying should be as scary as falling asleep. When believers close their eyes to this world, Jesus opens them again. And we'll find ourselves in his presence, standing in a new world, in his new creation.
  
- ❖ Friends, do you believe this? **Do you share in the hope of the resurrection?** It's the highest hope we have. I know you hope for a healing. You should. You should be lifting up faith-filled prayers with healing as the goal. And we want to join you in praying those prayers. That's why your pastors have been burdened to organize an **All Church Prayer Service**. The first one will take place next Sunday late afternoon. We want to mobilize members, across the church, to join our voices in prayer for those who are sick, for those who are suffering.
  - **But whether God heals their body in this life – or not – we know that our highest hope for the sick and suffering is that they share in this future resurrection.** So while we'll be praying for the sick and for their bodies, we'll also be praying for their souls to be safe and secure in the hope of the resurrection. Praying for salvation – praying for a spiritual awakening for the lost – has been the focus on this prayer and fasting initiative. And it'll be the theme for April's All Church Prayer Service.