

Lazarus! Come Out!

By Jim and Carolyn Murphy

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The book of John is indeed unique among the four Gospels. It stands alone in its ability to convey the love, gentleness, and humanity of Jesus. John portrays so beautifully Jesus' compassion for those with whom He came in contact: Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the heart-warming discourse with His disciples in chapters 13-16, and, of course, the high priestly prayer of chapter 17.

But I consider John's account of Lazarus' death, burial and resurrection to be among the most dramatic and compassionate events in Jesus' ministry. The raising of Lazarus from the dead went beyond His prior miracles. It spanned several days in time, it involved people whom Jesus knew personally and loved dearly, and it engaged the Jewish rulers at a new level of intensity.

We are all familiar with the story in John, chapter 11. For the sake of brevity, rather than quote the entire Scripture, I will give an overview of the story.

Jesus was resting with His disciples east of the Jordan, away from the hostility of the Jews, when word came that His friend, Lazarus, was sick. Jesus remained two more days then announced to the disciples that Lazarus had died. The disciples, with some reservations, followed Jesus back to Bethany, seemingly into the very clutches of the Jewish rulers from whom He had just narrowly escaped. Jesus stopped some distance from Lazarus' home where Mary and Martha, his sisters, still lived. Jesus sent word privately of His arrival first to Martha, then to Mary.

During Jesus' discourse with Martha He told her that her brother would rise again. Martha lapsed into her comfortable Jewish theology agreeing with Him that Lazarus would indeed rise "in the resurrection at the last day." (v 24) Then Jesus made this revolutionary statement, "I AM the resurrection..."! (v. 25) We pick up John's account at verse 32.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord." they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

"Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by

this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for four days."

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. (Jn 11:32-46 NIV).

Why Did Lazarus End Up in the Tomb?

Yes, I realize this is a simple question with an obvious answer: Lazarus died and he had to be buried somewhere so he was buried in the tomb. But I want to go beyond this obvious answer. A tomb is usually a very small place, isn't it? In fact, many tombs were so small that there was only room for one or two bodies. There was very little room for sitting, standing or moving about.

Now let's shift our thinking into the spirit realm and examine some spiritual tombs. In other words, let's see what spiritual lessons we can learn from the death, burial and resurrection of Lazarus.

Just as there are laws of nature by which we are bound, such as the law of gravity, the speed of light, and so on, there are also spiritual laws by which we are bound. One of those spiritual laws is found in Romans 6:23, "...the wages of sin is death..." Scripture also says "the soul who sins is the one who will die." (Eze 18:20 NIV).

Since Adam sinned, we have inherited that sin because we are his descendants. That is penalty enough to condemn us to death. But in addition to Adam's sin we also have **personal** sin. These personal sins are the sins we choose to commit and for which we must eventually collect the wages due, that is, death. Note this "death" isn't physical nor is it instantaneous. It is usually drawn out over a long period of time, often over many years. This slow spiritual death occurs as one develops "sin patterns" in his or her life. As these sin patterns become a sinful lifestyle one begins to earn the wages connected with it.

The cumulative effect of these earned wages builds. For example, the person with this lifestyle lacks any real,

lasting, deep contentment. He or she is usually vaguely dissatisfied, feeling empty inside. This dissatisfaction happens even when one is wealthy by the world's standards. Indeed, often the more one acquires, the less satisfied he or she becomes. Another byproduct of this lifestyle is often a failed or unhappy marriage and a splintered family life. Sadly, this person usually ends up surrounded by people who are just like him, just as self-centered and uncaring as he is.

The Law of Freedom

Now there is another law in Scripture, the "law of freedom" found in Galatians 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." This verse tells us that one who is born-again, and who diligently walks in the light of the Gospel, standing firm in his or her faith, having clean hands and a pure heart, is the most "free" person in the world. Even if he is in some way physically imprisoned, he is spiritually free!

The first man, Adam was certainly free before his fall, wasn't he? God placed him in the Garden of Eden and gave him only one "do not." **The only command God made of Adam was that he not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.** Now I ask you, is that freedom? Adam was free to do anything else he wanted to do. There were no other restrictions. Yes, that was indeed freedom.

Paul also illustrates this principle for us. On one occasion he was imprisoned by the Roman government. Yet, even as he was bound in physical chains, he referred to himself as "the prisoner of Christ"! (Eph 3:1). Paul came to know this freedom and he revealed in it!

Now, what do these two spiritual laws teach us? They teach us that 1) if we live sinful lifestyles we draw a wage that leads to death, that is, a spiritual tomb, and, 2) if we are cleansed by the blood of Christ and choose to live a life of obedience, we experience great and wonderful freedom in Christ.

Self-Life Leads to the Tomb Even For A Christian!

Now let's refine this concept of a tomb-like lifestyle. Usually when we think of a sinful lifestyle, we think of people committing crimes, being sexually loose, being addicted to illegal substances, and so on. But there is a Christian life-style that seems innocent of these outward sins yet still leads to the tomb. It is what I call the "self-life." I define a "self-life" as a life that is lived for self without any consideration for the will of God or for the good of others. The reason this self-life is so subtle for a Christian is because it doesn't appear evil in itself. It's not listed among the "six things the Lord hates. . ." (Pv 6:16) but in a very real way it leads the Christian into a living

tomb just as surely as death landed Lazarus there.

How does a Christian end up in the self-life? It's easy. He gets there by always choosing what is best for himself. This person never or only rarely consults or considers the Lord in matters of choice. He just asks, "Which way is the easiest? Which way gives my flesh gratification?" Then he goes with his own answer.

Let's look at a very good example in Scripture of self-life and its consequences. In the book of Genesis, Abram [Abraham] and Lot started to have problems with each other because of the growth of their respective herds of cattle. Abram realized they had to separate so he devised a plan. Now remember, Abram already had God's promise of great blessings for himself and his descendants. (Gen 12:2-3). He believed that word so he knew he couldn't lose.

So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."

Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot **chose for himself** the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tent near Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord. (Gen 13:8-13 NIV, emphasis added).

Let's analyze this situation in practical terms. Abram gave Lot his choice of land and he took what was left. There is no indication that Lot consulted God before he picked. He simply chose the best pasture land, land that would make his cattle fat, land that would make him **rich!** In so doing, he left the barren, rocky desert land to uncle Abe. I can just hear Lot now, "He was dumb enough to let me choose! It's his own fault his cattle are grazing among the rocks. After all, **I've got to look out for myself!** No one else will." Lot chose the self-life. But where did it lead him?

We all know where Lot's choice led him. He was in Sodom when the angels of the Lord came to destroy it. The angels led Lot quickly out before it's destruction. But again, Lot made a self-life choice. As he was leaving Sodom, the angel told him to flee "to the mountains," but Lot objected. He asked and received permission to flee "to Zoar." God's choice for Lot was the mountains. Lot's self-choice was Zoar. (Gen 19:18-22).

Here is an interesting observation. **The Hebrew word used in verse 20 for "Zoar" means "a very small**

place." Does that not sound just like a tomb to you?

You see, Lot's choices, such as the best pasture, living in Sodom, choosing to flee to Zoar rather than the mountains, all ended him in "a very small place." So here is Lot, reaping the wages of his self-life. And he did it to himself by his own choices.

The "Lots" of Today

All of us have friends and/or loved ones today who have chosen the self-life that Lot did. We all know and love people who are living in a Zoar, don't we? As we have already seen, this person may even be a Christian. That is to say, he or she may have accepted Jesus as his Savior. But clearly, Jesus is not Lord in our "Lot's" life. That's why he or she is really imprisoned in a spiritual tomb.

The "Stone"

Now let's look at the stone which had been rolled in front of Lazarus' tomb. Notice that Jesus commanded those present to roll the stone away from the entrance. It was after they did as He commanded and moved the stone that Lazarus was able to exit from the tomb.

I believe that we, as Christians, can learn a lesson from this rolling away of the stone. You see, it is our job to do as Jesus directs us when we are dealing with those in our lives who have taken up residence in the tomb. We are to be obedient to whatever Jesus tells us to do concerning that loved one or friend. But, how can we know what Jesus asks of us in this kind of situation? The answer is to pray and ask the Lord to show you what to do. Then do it! Be obedient!

I can think of the example of a wayward child. We, as loving parents, want to shield and protect our children from harm. Now, suppose our fourteen year-old son is choosing a tomb-like lifestyle. In that case, the Lord will usually direct us to be very involved in his life and do everything we can to help him turn from that lifestyle. But suppose you have spent years trying to help this son and he is now twenty-four. It's ten years later and he is still living as he chooses and you are still trying to bail him out of trouble! At this point the Lord may well direct you to quit trying to shield him and allow him to accept some of the consequences of his actions. Notice that the "rolling away of the stone" of ten years ago is not the same as it is today. Now the rolling away of the stone may be simply to leave that son to face the full consequences of his lifestyle. Of course, we are always to continue to pray for him. That never stops! Prayer is always part of the rolling away of the stone.

Whatever the Lord tells us to do concerning those around us who are living in a tomb, it is our job to be

obedient. That obedience is part of the process of allowing that person the freedom to come out of the tomb into the light of Jesus Christ!

Lazarus! Come out!

Once Jesus had the stone removed from in front of the tomb, what did He do next? He commanded Lazarus to come out, didn't He? Did Lazarus have a choice? I believe he did. I suppose he could have simply chosen to stay in the tomb. He could have decided he liked it there and expected his two sisters to come into the tomb every time he was hungry or needed or wanted something. But what did Jesus command? He commanded Lazarus to come out of that dark tomb into His light and His presence.

And I believe that is what our Lord is still doing with the Lots/Lazarus' of today. When Lazarus come forth, Jesus was standing there waiting for him. I believe Jesus is still standing in the light waiting for our Lazarus' to come into His presence. And He is still commanding them, however lovingly, to come out. But it is still a choice. That act of obedience is still required. Our Lots/Lazarus' still have to yield to God's authority, God's word, and God's command.

And just imagine the scene once Lazarus did come forth. Not only was Jesus waiting for him, but his sisters and his friend were too, all gathered around to welcome him back to life!

If You Believe You Will See the Glory of God

Let me give a little encouragement here to all those who have been praying and dealing with their Lots for years, maybe even decades. Jesus said to Martha, in effect, "Believe Martha, don't give up! Keep your faith in me and you will see God's glory!" These were very strong and encouraging words, weren't they? And Jesus continues to say to us, "Don't give up. Don't stop praying. Don't stop believing that I can do all things, even what may seem impossible to your human understanding! Nothing is impossible for me." Yes, it is our job to be obedient, to pray, and to believe that our Jesus can do all things!

Grave Clothes

The Bible says that Lazarus came out of the tomb "wrapped in grave clothes." Grave clothes are offensive. They are dirty and have a foul odor. But Jesus gave the command to those around Lazarus to take off his grave clothes.

Often when the Lots and Lazarus' of our life come forth from the grave they still have "grave clothes" on. I remember seeing a teenager brought to a nice "respectable" church in grave clothes. He wore shorts, no shoes, and a "T" shirt with a Marijuana leaf printed on the front with

the words "Marijuana Grower's Local 449." The youth pastor had picked him up hitchhiking and had brought him to church. . . grave clothes and all. Some were offended but I admired that youth pastor. He truly understood God's command to help that young Lazarus remove his grave clothes. How many of us would do the same in that situation?

We must always remember that the one wearing the grave clothes is far more important than our offense at the clothes. We mustn't begin to lecture and demean our newly resurrected Lazarus because of his clothes. "Man! these clothes stink! What have you been doing? How dare you come into our church with these clothes on! Get out of here until you know how to act in the house of God!" No, we mustn't ever let our offense at his grave clothes drive him back into the tomb!

Remember, Jesus didn't say, "Put him back in the tomb until he gets those grave clothes off." He said, "Loose him." That means **receive him just as he is** and begin to gently, lovingly teach him the things of God, allowing the Holy Spirit to transform his heart. As he begins to follow the Lord, the grave clothes will fall off and a new creation emerge, dressed in the "white linen" of the saints of God.

What About Those Who Never Lived in Zoar?

Let's go back to Abram for a moment. Our churches are full of modern day Abrams. They are the Christians who have always obeyed the Lord, who have never really indulged in the self-life. In churches often all of the attention is focused on the newly resurrected Lazarus. He is asked to give his testimony or he is featured as a speaker

while our obedient Abraham just sits there. Sometimes such Christians begin to think they have been passed over. Not so!

What happened to Abram when he let Lot choose the richest land? Where did his decision to lay aside self-life lead him? It led him literally to greener pastures. We see God's obvious pleasure in the verses immediately following Lot's departure.

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. . ." (Gen 13:14-15 NIV).

Abram's "land-grant" far exceeded that of Zoar, didn't it! The spiritual law of liberty pays far greater dividends than the law of sin and death. Lot set out to get all he could get. Abram trusted fully in God. One ended up in "a very small place" named Zoar, the other ended up possessing the whole land! And notice, that land was confined only by how far Abram could see. In other words, only his vision limited him in the land he would possess! Think of that! I believe Christ wants to give each of us all the land we can see. It is up to us how far our vision reaches.

Lord, give me the vision to see that Lot or Lazarus in my life resurrected and whole in You. Give me the vision to see the Church of Jesus Christ on the move all over this world pushing back the darkness. Give me the vision to see myself as a warrior in Your kingdom, accomplishing Your work in this generation. Lord, give me Your vision in all things. Then help me be diligent in prayer and action until Your will is accomplished in my life. Amen.

HUNDREDFOLD MINISTRIES, INTERNATIONAL

P. O. Box 625
Blue Jay, CA 92317

Telephone 909/336-9701

E-mail: jim.murphy@hundredfold.org Web site: www.hundredfold.org

Rev. Jim Murphy and his wife, Carolyn, of Blue Jay, California, United States, head Hundredfold Ministries, International. They write Christian teaching literature and travel to the Developing Nations of the world teaching Christian leaders. Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l is a cross-denominational Christian ministry dedicated to strengthening the church in the Developing Nations of the world.

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