

WITH JESUS AND MARTHA

AT A FUNERAL

My daughter recently adopted a Russian Blue cat from the Hayward animal shelter. It is a young animal, very playful. She got mouse toys, stringed feathers, a tree house, and all sorts of things to entertain the cat. At night the cat would sleep with her on the bed. When she left for work in the morning the cat bid her good bye. Upon arriving home at night the cat is there to greet her. She loves the cat. It brings much joy to her life.

Last week the cat slowed down and became lethargic. She took it to the veterinarian for tests. It was determined the cat had an immune deficiency which lay dormant for some time and then suddenly activated. The virus caused fluid to build up around the heart restricting the blood flow. There is no cure for the disease.

For this whole week she has been emotion wrought up over what to do about the cat. Yesterday she wanted me to go to the vet's office with her to euthanize the cat. I watched as she stroked the cat's head and told him that she loved him. It brought tears to my eyes to see her in such pain. We prayed together. We talked a lot. We watched as the intravenous injection put the cat to sleep. It was a difficult moment.

Does the gospel of Jesus Christ save us in such times? Yes, it does. Jesus brings life to our sorrowful, mourning hearts.

John 11:1: "Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha."

Not far distant from Jerusalem's east side is the village of Bethany. This little close-knit family of brother and sisters had a keen affection for Jesus and often invited Him over for some refreshment and relaxation. But now something serious has hit the home, Lazarus has contracted a fatal illness.

John 11:3: "Therefore his sisters sent unto Him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick."

Now when you get a message that someone is seriously ill, and you are close friends, it is imperative that you not dally about in responding to the news. The sisters obviously anticipated Jesus' immediate arrival.

John 11:4: "When Jesus heard that, He said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby."

Our agenda in the face of death is to say our last words so that there will be no regrets later on. The guilt of remaining silent and unresponsive can be oppressive after the passing of a friend. But Jesus' agenda was much different. In all that He did Jesus first thought was, What would my Father do? And the Father would magnify His Son, so Jesus must glorify His Father.

John 11:5: "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus."

Not only was Jesus a friend of this family, He loved them with an unconditional affection that desired their best good and salvation.

John 11:6: "When He had heard therefore that he was sick, He abode two days still in the same place where He was."

What need to be in a hurry? "He that believeth shall not make haste." Suppose the grave did close for a moment upon one whom it claimed as its prey: that proved nothing.

When a general was informed in the heat of the battle that the day was lost, he coolly replied, "Very well, we'll take it again," and he did. Defeat was but a step to victory. So death did not disconcert Jesus.

Jesus was a busy man, and often busy people get distracted by the things at hand. However, this two-day delayed response on His part was intentional. After hearing the news He stayed put for forty-eight hours. That's a long time to have on your mind the fatal illness of a brother.

Suppose, you have two kids with the ages of one-year-old and eight-year-old and you left them at home. When you reach home, both kids are crying and wanted you to take them. Which one will you take first, the one-year-old or eight-year-old? Most assuredly the one-year-old. Because you know that the eight-year-old is stronger than this one-year-old. The eight-year-old can cry a little more. The one-year-old needs immediate attention. This is true in the spiritual life also. The prayers of some people may be heard immediately. The young believers get answers for their prayers immediately. But as we grow older in our faith, the answer to our prayers may be delayed.

If you have prayed and not had an immediate answer to your liking, then you have experienced God's delays. Christ's delays are the delays of love. They are not the delays of indifference as though He does not care. Neither are His delays the result of preoccupation. He did not delay because He was too busy to deal with the problem. He

does delay for a purpose. And it is imperative that you and I understand His purpose for our lives if for no other reason than to realize our impatience coupled with fear of the unknown. It is that we might understand our complete dependence upon Him. If the answers from God always came immediately, our faith would not grow. We would jump right onto the next thing and expect immediate results. Jesus delays in order to strengthen our faith as we are forced to wait trusting that God knows what He is doing and He will do it in His own time. God is never in haste. He never comes too soon or too late.

John 11:7: "Then after that saith He to His disciples, Let us go into Judaea again."

It's interesting to note what Jesus didn't say. He didn't say, Let's go help Lazarus. Or, Let's go to Bethany. He didn't say, I'll go and you stay. He said, "Let us go into Judaea again." That was to face all the dangers of being stoned by enemies who hated Jesus. Could it be this is the reason that Jesus' delayed His coming to Lazarus? He knew that it would prematurely precipitate the end for Him, and He didn't want to go ahead of the Father's plans for Him.

John 11:11: "After that He saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep."

Sleep is harmless. In fact, it is quite beneficial for us to get eight hours of sleep each night and awaken refreshed in the morning. Sleep is restful. Are you afraid of sleep?

In Scotland an old man lay dying. He was afraid of death. The minister who was attending him was trying to comfort him. The minister asked if he had not been a shepherd. "Aye," answered the Scotsman, "I have waited upon the sheep many a day."

"And," asked the minister, "did you never stand on the hillside and watch the wind blow a cloud across the valley?"

"Many a time," said the dying man.

"And when the shadow of that cloud came racing across the heather toward you and the flock, were you afraid?"

The old shepherd drew himself up slightly from his pillow and cried, "What! Afraid of a shadow? Jamie has never been afraid of anything."

The minister then turned to his Bible and read the twenty-third Psalm as the truth broke over Jamie: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."

Jesus bore the eternal separation from the Father when He cried out to the Father, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He

was separated from God so that for us death is but a sleep, harmless, but a shadow. We cannot be separated from the Father.

John 11:12-14. "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."

Yet nowadays there is hardly anything that will excite the opposition of the majority of professed Christians more quickly than to preach, according to these very words of Christ, that the dead are asleep. In these days to speak of death as sleep is to subject yourself to the bigoted epithet of "soul-sleeper," "materialist," "teacher of infidelity," and what not.

I was requested to officiate at the funeral of a deceased by the son who was an ex-Adventist here in Hayward. He put me on notice before the funeral that I was not to say anything about soul-sleep because he was deeply offended by the idea that the dead are resting in the grave. He believed they had gone home to glory at death.

But here we have the plain record of the word of Christ, that when speaking of the death of Lazarus He said, he "*sleepeth*," and then to make the matter certain that such is His meaning He said plainly, "Lazarus is *dead*." Nothing could be plainer than that the doctrine of the Lord Jesus is that the dead are asleep.

In the year 1776, the year of the signing of the American Declaration of Independence, an English minister, Augustus M. Toplady, was walking across a field in Somersetshire when he was suddenly overtaken by a storm. He was still several miles from home. The place was exposed. But he noticed a cleft running down a mass of rock beside a road, and in that cleft he took refuge. There he stayed till the storm passed. Toplady was a godly man. He had been converted in 1740, at the age of sixteen, while sitting in a barn listening to a man preach who could not even write his name. Toplady had since had a very fruitful ministry. Now, sitting in the cleft of the rock, he thought of spiritual things and, picking up a playing card that he found lying on the ground at his feet, he began to write the words of a hymn that has since become one of the most popular of the English-speaking world. "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in thee." Christ was struck for us in order that we might hide in Him as the storms of death pass by.

Something more than a glimmering of the fullness of the truth seems to have been in the mind of Martha, when she met Jesus with the words: "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." John 11:21. She recognized the fact that the presence of Jesus is a protection from death. This is what most of us have yet to learn. We still sing,

"Abide with me when night is nigh;
For without Thee I dare not die,"

forgetful of the fact that with Him there is no eternal death; because He is "the life," and He "hath abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel." 2 Tim. 1:10. In Him, even the dead find life; much more, therefore, shall those who live in Him, and He in them, be preserved from extinction. Some may, indeed, as Christ Himself, and Paul, and others, offer their lives as witnesses to the truth, but it will be in the joyful consciousness that they are victors over death, that the sting is withdrawn, and that it is impossible for them to be held by it.

One young Waldensian lady of about fifteen is spoken of as having been buried alive. A hole was dug in the ground, she placed in it upright, and the dirt thrown around her and stamped down. The cross was offered her by the Papists, and she was asked if she would renounce her faith and embrace the faith of the church. She refused; more dirt was placed around her and stamped down. The cross was still offered, but still she refused. Then more dirt was placed around her; and thus they continued to throw dirt about her and stamp it down, and then offer her the privilege of renouncing her faith, until they reached her head. After the dirt had been stamped around her so that she could only speak and scarcely breathe, still she refused. She knew what awaited her. Then she was covered and the dirt stamped over her, and thus she perished.

Martha, however, did not allow regret for the past to shut out all comfort for the present, as she added, "But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee." John 11:22. It was a confession of faith for a present blessing. But the lesson of Martha's confession is for all time. It is natural enough to regret the past; to feel that if only this or that had not occurred, or if only the Lord had interposed and ordered differently, we could now have faith and courage. But whatever the past, there is blessing from the Lord for every one just now. He has present comfort for those who sorrow

under bereavement, and present forgiveness and good cheer for those who sorrow over past failures and misfortunes. God lives to bless and comfort and work in the present.

John 11:23: "Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again." With these words Jesus encouraged Martha's expression of faith.

When Jesus said to Martha that her brother Lazarus should rise again, she replied, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." John 11:24. Lazarus was now dead, and awaiting his resurrection from the dust. Martha understood that fact. She had sat at the feet of Jesus and been taught of Him. She knew what death was. If she had been in error, He who alone had the power of life and death was before her, and He would have told her the truth. He would have done that which was the expression of His love for them, and given the assurance that was best for them. This is what He did. If Lazarus had not been dead, but entered into a blissful immortality, Jesus, who loved them both, would have told Martha so, and explained to her how unkind an act it would be to call back the loved one to the cares and trials of the world. But He told her nothing different from that which she had said. Lazarus was dead. As to this fact, and the understanding of what death was, there is evident harmony in the thought and words of Martha and Christ.

"Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life." John 11:25.

This is the Golden Text. More majestic words were never uttered on earth than these. His answer to her was intended to open her mind to the understanding of the fact that as the resurrection, at the last day, was through Him, so He was able at that time to raise her brother from the grave. It was just as easy for Jesus to call Lazarus forth then as it will be at "the last day," in "the hour that is coming when all that are in the graves shall hear His voice and shall come forth." John 5:28. He was the Word that was in the beginning with God, and that was God. He was the resurrection and the life in the days of Abraham as well as in the time of Lazarus. "In Him was life," even endless life.

John 11:25. "He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live."

What a marvelous confidence in the power of the Father, was manifested in the *seeming* indifference of Jesus! He claimed nothing for Himself; He acknowledged that He had no power in Himself; but He knew what He had believed, and in quietness and in confidence was His strength. What a lesson of trust there is for us in this story of Jesus and Lazarus.

John 11:26: "And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

Life is the most common thing in the world, yet it is the thing that, in general, is least understood. Christ is the resurrection, because He is the life; and He is the life, because He is the resurrection. Each one involves the other; for the resurrection means the ascension, the springing up, of new life; and this we have day by day. If Christ as the resurrection were not in all men, even the wicked, not one of them could live a single day. As Christ was "slain from the foundation of the world," even so He was risen from that time.

Not alone the trusting ones, but even the unthankful and the unholy receive "moment by moment new life from above;" but too often this gift of God profits them not, because they do not by faith lay hold upon the eternal life so freely bestowed, and it passes from them.

Everyone can see for himself that this is not fancy, but plain, sober, simple truth. We know that all life comes from God, and that we have but one breath of it at a time. Now this life that comes to us fresh every moment is the power, the very essence, of the resurrection. Moment by moment God is making it easy for us to grasp the truth that He is the resurrection and the life, and that at the last day "this mortal shall put on immortality." We become weak and faint, and through God's gift in Christ we experience strength and refreshing. We are wounded and sick, and new life heals our wounds and restores our wasted frame. What is this but the visible working of the resurrection,—the swallowing up of death by life?

For all, "yea, for the rebellious also," Christ has received this wondrous gift; and that all may know that it is for them, He gives them the use of it now. Their use or abuse of it now will determine whether or not they can have it to all eternity. If they are wholly unappreciative and unmindful of it, squandering it, even hating it, and, worst of all, hating the righteousness that He bestows with it, they will sooner or later lose it entirely. What use to continue gifts to those who care not for them, and do not use them? Those who recognize the Giver, and glorify Him by their thanksgiving, showing love for His righteousness, will have the life continued to them, so that with it they may practice righteousness throughout eternity, and enjoy an indescribably greater fullness of it. Those who in Paul's day said that the resurrection was already past, were guilty of a grave error; and their teaching tended to lead people from faith into sin; for without the resurrection as an ever present reality no one could walk with Christ "in newness of life." The

resurrection is not past, but proceeding; and for those who come to the knowledge of the truth there will one day be a realization of the fullness of it, when to life is added immortality.

John 11:27. "She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world."

This is not a totally off-the-wall response to Jesus' statement that whoever believes in Him shall never die. She affirmed her belief in Christ—the Messiah—the Anointed One. She believed Jesus to be "the Son of God." He is very God indeed, with life in Himself that is original, unborrowed, and underived. Martha's threefold confession concludes with the statement "who should come into the world." He is God's promised seed of Abraham through whom all families of the earth should be blessed (Gen. 22:18).

John 11:28: "And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come, and calleth for thee."

High in the Alps, at the historic Saint Bernard Pass, there is a hostel that is run by monks. They keep the great Saint Bernard dogs there. In the last century, in the winter, when the snow would be coming down and the air would be so filled with flakes that a person could not see the trail, the monks used to ring a great bell so that the traveler who was making his way up the trail through the snow could almost be led to the hostel by the sound. That is what Jesus did for Mary. He sounded the bell. Life is sometimes so filled with the mist of afflictions or sorrows that we cannot see the way clearly. Here is a bell that all can hear and follow. Jesus says, Come to me!

John 11:29, 32: "As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came unto Him. . . . Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died."

There could be no funeral in the presence of Jesus. Wherever He went the ill were restored to life. The dead were raised. It is absolutely true that had Jesus come sooner Lazarus would not have died.

John 11:33: "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, He groaned in the spirit, and was troubled."

The Jews were weeping crocodile tears. They would later plot His murder as well as Lazarus. He saw through their pretense.

John 11:34, 35: "And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto Him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept."

There are some who think of God as indifferent without any feeling. If a person can feel sorrow or joy, gladness or grief, it means that someone else can have an effect upon Him; for it is someone else who causes these emotions. If another can have an effect upon Him, it follows that He must also have power over Him. But no one can have power over God. Then it must mean that God cannot have feelings. He must be lonely, isolated, compassionless.

But the Scripture reports, "Jesus wept." What a compassionate God! It was at the grave of Lazarus, and He knew that in a few moments the dead would come forth. It was, then, because He saw in the grief of the weeping friends the sorrow of the world, because of the ruin wrought by sin. His heart was touched by human grief and He wept in sympathy with it. But "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." It was God crying as He witnessed the sorrow of His children. "In all their affliction He was afflicted," and it is ever the same. "As one whom his mother comforteth" even so the Lord says He will comfort those in trouble, and it is because even as a mother's heart is touched by the misfortunes of her child, God's great heart of pity is "touched with the feeling of our infirmities."

John 11:36. "Then said the Jews, Behold how He loved him!"

Where is it that we first see His love? Is it when we first became aware of His love? Or when He died for us? Or when He created us? As far as we can look back into the past we find Him loving us. It was in eternity past that He so identified Himself with us that He took up our cause and determined to redeem His fallen people.

Jesus established a covenant with His Father on our behalf long before we were able to have any part in it personally. He pledged Himself to die for us, thereby giving His life as a ransom and an atonement for our sins. The pledge was unilateral, for He did it by Himself with the Father and without our asking. It is eternal, for what He has begun He will most certainly bring to completion. It is undeserved, for we are lost in sin and therefore have no claim upon Him. It is sealed with Christ's blood; for we are saved "through the blood of the eternal covenant" (Heb. 13:40). Jesus pledged Himself to do what we could never do, so uniting Himself with us that His death became our death, His life our life, His resurrection our own resurrection. And when did He do this? Before we were even born. So great was His love for us!

John 11:41. "Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid."

You can visit Lazarus' tomb today in Bethany. You enter it at street level and then climb down several flights of stairs to the subterranean crypt carved out of the limestone.

John 11:43. "And when He thus had spoken, He cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth."

Christ went, looked upon him in the grave where he had been laid, and said, "Lazarus, come forth." And he came, not from the heavens, a transfigured, seraphic being, but from the grave, the man Lazarus, bound with grave clothes.

"Thou shalt see the glory of God." Did any dazzling light shine upon the company there assembled? There is no evidence of any such thing. Everything was quiet, and no light appeared to any, except the ordinary daylight; yet all present saw the glory of God. How?—In the power that was displayed in the resurrection of Lazarus.

God's glory is His power, and that is His righteousness. His glory is His own personality,—His character,—and since His glory is His power, we see that He is glorious and powerful because He is righteous.

In Christ we have a resurrection to a new life. Paul prays that he may know Him and the "*power of His resurrection*." What is the power of that resurrection? "But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us [made us alive] together with Christ (by grace ye are saved)." Eph. 2:4, 5, 6, and 7.

He *hath* done this, and He "hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." We were dead, we are quickened, and we are raised up to sit in heavenly places with Christ Jesus. We must have, and we can have, the life of Christ today; for when He comes, He will change our vile bodies by the same power by which He *has* changed our hearts. The heart must be changed now. It cannot be changed except by the life of Christ coming in and abiding in it. But when Christ is in the heart, we can live the life of Christ, and then when He comes, the glory will be revealed. He was Christ when he was here upon earth, although He did not have a retinue of angels and glory visible about Him. He was Christ when He was the Man of Sorrows. Then, when He ascended, the glory was revealed. So with us. Christ must dwell in our hearts

now, and when He comes and changes these bodies, then the glory will be revealed.

In the year 1873, a Christian lawyer from Chicago, named Horatio Spafford, placed his wife and four children on the luxury liner *Ville de Havre* sailing from New York to France. Spafford expected to join them in about three or four weeks after finishing up some business, but with the exception of his wife he never saw them again. The trip started out beautifully. But on the evening of November 21, 1873, as the *Ville de Havre* proceeded peacefully across the Atlantic, the ship was suddenly struck by another vessel, the *Lochearn*, and sank a mere thirty minutes later, with the loss of nearly all on board.

On being told that the ship was sinking Mrs. Spafford knelt with her children and prayed that they might be saved or be made willing to die, if such was God's will. A few minutes later, in the confusion, three of the children were swept away by the waves while she stood clutching the youngest. Suddenly the youngest child was swept from her arms. She reached out and caught the baby's gown. Then the baby, a little girl, was lost again. Mrs. Spafford became unconscious and awoke later to find that she had been rescued by sailors from the *Lochearn*. But the four children were gone.

Back in the United States Horatio Spafford was waiting for news of his family, and at last, ten days later (after the rescue ship had reached Cardiff), it came. "Saved alone" was his wife's message. That night Spafford walked the floor of his room in anguish, as anyone would have done. But this was not all. For as he shared his loss with his Lord, a loss that could not be reversed in this life, he found, as many have, that peace that indeed passes all understanding. Toward morning he told a friend named Major Whittle, "I am glad to be able to trust my Lord when it costs me something." Then, sometime later, as he reflected on the disaster at sea, he wrote:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea-billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Jesus loved Lazarus, as he also loved Martha and Mary. Does Jesus, in a special sense, love you? Are you aware of that love? You say, "But how can I be?" I will tell you how. You can know it if you love Him; for we are told, "We love because he first loved us." Do you

love Him? Is there that love-bond that is evidence of the fact that you are one of His sheep, one of those for whom He died? If there is, then let me encourage you to live in a way that demonstrates the reality and depth of His love. If you are well, serve Him vigorously. If you are sick, let the world see how you are able to glorify God in your sickness.