

***That's a Good Question – 25***  
**John 11:20-26**  
**“Christ’s Message for the Mourner”**

1. On November 19th, 1985 the world’s focus was on a conversation between two men in Geneva, Switzerland. Those two men were President Ronald Reagan, and Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Their meeting was the first time in eight years that the leaders of the two rival superpowers had met face-to-face.

2. While there were no major agreements signed at that initial meeting, reports said that Reagan and Gorbachev engaged in a series of long, personal conversations that helped to establish a close relationship between two men who would eventually bring the Cold War to an end.

3. No doubt, some historians would consider the talks between Reagan and Gorbachev among some of the most significant conversations in history.

4. In John chapter 11, we find another very important and monumental conversation in its own right. This conversation involved Jesus and a broken-hearted sister named Martha. The exchange that occurred between Christ and this mourner produced one of the most important theological statements ever uttered by the Lord Jesus.

5. Jesus looked at the distraught and disappointed Martha and said, “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...”

6. After that divine assertion, Jesus said to Martha, “Believest thou this?” That is a good question. It is of the utmost importance that we grasp and believe Christ’s message for the mourner in John 11.

7. The death of Lazarus, and the miracle of his resurrection, is a story with texture; an account with several layers of truth. The eleventh chapter of John’s gospel is worthy of a series of sermons, not just one message.

8. Therefore, rather than trying to cover the entire story, I want us to examine just the conversation that occurred between our Lord and Martha when He first arrived in Bethany.

9. From that conversation, there are three truths that we find that speak to us about Jesus, and what He has to say to those who are hurting. First of all, from this conversation we learn that:

**I. OUR EXPERIENCE IS REAL TO JESUS**

1. In verse 20, John tells us that as soon as word reached the house that Jesus had arrived in Bethany, Martha rushed out to meet Him, and to speak with Him.
2. Verse 21 records Martha's first words to the Lord following the death of her brother. It says, "Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died."
3. One writer commented on this verse and said, "When Martha met Jesus, her heart spoke through her lips."<sup>i</sup> Her words to the Lord were a strange mixture of faith and frustration.
4. Verse 21 records the outburst of a woman who believed in the ability of Jesus, but was confused and hurt by the activity of Jesus. To Martha, the fact that Jesus had not prevented the death of her brother was hurtful and confusing.
5. What Martha did not realize was that the death of her brother was not an event outside the control or concern of the Lord Jesus. Lazarus' death was as real to Christ as it had been to the grieving sisters.
6. Likewise, in the crises of our lives, the Lord Jesus is not disconnected from our experiences. In fact, the story of John 11 reminds us of a couple of truths regarding our Lord's connection to our trials. First of all, our experience is real to Him:

#### **A. Even when He seems distant**

1. At the beginning of the chapter, we are told of Lazarus' sickness, and in verse 3, it says, "Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick."
2. When the word reached Jesus, He was in a rather secluded part of the country called Perea. It was on the other side of the Jordan River from Jerusalem, and a full two days journey from Bethany.
3. As the sisters wiped the fevered brow of their brother, and watched his life drain away, Perea must have seemed like the other side of the world. To them, Jesus seemed distant.
4. When Martha said, "If you had been here..." she revealed that in her mind, His distance had somehow prevented Him from intervening and meeting her need.
5. Have you ever prayed and felt as if God was too distant, or too disconnected to do anything about your situation? Have sent word to Him, only to feel as if He was too far away to really help?

6. What Martha did not know is that long before the breathless messenger arrived in Perea with the word about Lazarus, Jesus already knew that Lazarus was sick, and He knew the outcome of the sickness.

7. In verse 4, Jesus said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby."

8. You see; even when He seems distant, your experience is real to Him. He knows what is going on in your life. Notice something else about His connection to the trials of our lives. Notice not only that our experience is real to Jesus even when He seems distant, but they are also real to Him:

### **B. Even when He seems delayed**

1. Verse 6 is a strange verse. There it says, "When [Jesus] heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was."

2. Jesus waited before He came to Bethany, and when He finally did arrive, His delay had obviously bothered Martha. She said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

3. Again, Martha displays both confidence and confusion. She expresses her faith in the ability of Jesus to keep Lazarus from dying, but at the same time she indicates that He is too late to help now that Lazarus is already dead.

4. Have you ever been in Martha's position? Have you ever felt like it was too late, even for God to do anything about a particular situation? Did you ever wonder if God had overslept and missed the bus in coming to your aid?

5. What Martha found out, and what we must remember is that even when He seems late, He's still Lord, and His timing is always perfect. He's never missed a deadline or failed to keep an appointment.

6. Neither distance nor delay can ever erase the fact that Jesus knows where we are and what we are facing. Our experience is real to Him, and somewhere, sometime, as with Martha, He will prove His connection to our crisis.

7. The British preacher of a past generation, F.B. Meyer, in his book on John's gospel, says of this passage, "He sits as a refiner of silver. He knows our sorrows. He is acquainted with our grief...And when He comes He does more than we asked our thought. He raises not the sick, but the dead."<sup>ii</sup>

8. Notice a second truth we draw from this conversation. Notice not only that *our experience is real to Jesus*, but notice also that:

## **II. OUR EXISTENCE IS REDEFINED BY JESUS**

1. Last month, a professor of philosophy at Chico State University in California gave a lecture about the meaning of life. The professor, spoke to a crowd of about 30 people, and told them at the outset that he wasn't ready to offer any answers about the question of life's meaning.
2. A newspaper report on the lecture opened by saying, "Anyone who hoped to discover the meaning of life by attending [Professor Wong's] lecture Thursday was probably disappointed."<sup>iii</sup>
3. One of things that make the conversation between Jesus and Martha so important and compelling is that in this brief conversation, the Lord Jesus redefines the typical understanding of human life and existence.
4. Look at the text with me, and notice what I mean. First of all, in Martha we see:

#### **A. The limited view of life**

1. In verse 21, Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died." In Martha's words we see how she defined life, and human existence.
2. To Martha, when her brother's lungs ceased to draw in air, and his heart stopped pumping blood, it marked the end of his life. Though she believed in an eventual resurrection of the body, in many ways she viewed death as the end of life.
3. In Martha's mind, the grave was the end point of human existence. Once someone had gone through the process of physical death, they ceased to live on in any capacity.
4. Unfortunately, time has not erased the limited view of life held by Martha. There are still many today, who in spite of what they may profess to believe, live as if this life is all there is, and that when they die, they will simply cease to exist.
5. Thoughts of life after death are shunned, and people say things like, "You only live once," as they try to avoid the subject of death while seeking to "live it up" before their life comes to a final end.
6. In 1971, former Beatle, John Lennon, released a solo album called *Imagine*, the title track of that album opened with the line:

*Imagine there's no heaven,  
It's easy if you try,  
No hell below us,  
Above us only sky*

7. Far too many people think very little of a heaven or a hell, or any existence beyond the moment when their heart stops beating. Much like Martha their view of life is limited to the existence between birth and death.

8. Part of Martha's frustration with the Lord was because she felt like He had allowed Lazarus to die, therefore ending his existence. She felt as if his death had ended his life.

9. However, in contrast to Martha's limited view of life, notice also further that we find here:

### **B. The Lord's view of life**

1. When the Lord responds to Martha, we find that the terms "death" and "life" mean very different things to Christ. His view of life was drastically different from that of Martha.

2. For the Lord Jesus, life and existence are not based on things as fragile as a pulse or a brain wave. Notice His words to Martha in verses 25 and 26. He said, "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."

3. Martha said her brother was dead. Jesus said he lived. According to the Lord of life, though the body of Lazarus had ceased to function, the life of Lazarus had continued in another place.

4. Jesus Christ redefines what it means to exist and to live. Those who believe upon Him may go through the process of dying, but they continue to exist beyond the point of death. They live on even though they have died.

5. The former king of England, known as Edward the Confessor, said just before he passed away, "Weep not, I shall not die; and as I leave the land of the dying I trust to see the blessings of the Lord in the land of the living."

6. Though many who have a limited view of life can't see it this way, the reality is that you and I are in the land of the dying, and those who pass through the process of death have entered into the land of the living.

7. J.D. Jones writes of death and says, "It is just the portal that admits us into eternal light and joy. But there is no cessation of being. There is no lapse of conscious life."<sup>iv</sup>

8. In the words of Jesus to Martha, we are reminded that our lives – our existence – will not come to an end when our bodies cease to function. Those who believe upon Jesus will never, never die!

9. There is a third truth we draw from Christ's message to the mourner. Notice not only that *our experience is real to Jesus*, and *our existence is redefined by Jesus*, but notice also finally that:

### **III. OUR EXPECTATION IS REALIZED IN JESUS**

1. Look again at the exchange between Martha and Jesus. Knowing what was about to transpire at the graveyard, Jesus says to Martha in verse 23, "Thy brother shall rise again."

2. In response to this, Martha says in verse 24, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

3. Both Jesus and Martha were talking about Lazarus, but while Martha was saying, "he shall", Jesus was saying, "I am." Martha was expecting something in the distant future. Jesus was offering something for the nasty now.

4. In this conversation, Jesus revealed to Martha that her hope and her help was not a prophetic event, but a present reality in the person of the One who is Himself the fulfillment of all prophecy.

5. The words of our Lord in this text remind us that everything we need, and everything we are looking for is found in Jesus. Notice a couple of things with regard to this truth. Notice first of all:

#### **A. The flaw of Martha's faith**

1. In this text, Martha displays a level of faith, but it is a flawed faith. For instance, she believed that Jesus could have healed Lazarus, but only if He had been present.

2. The reality is that Jesus could have spoken the word in Perea, and Lazarus would have instantly been made well. You see; Martha believed to some degree, but hers was a crippled conviction.

3. The biggest flaw in Martha's faith is that she could not connect her beliefs with her present circumstance. She says to Jesus in verse 24, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

4. For Martha, her hope was anchored in some distant event. She believed in something that would only help her beyond this life. She saw no present hope and no help for today.

5. Martha had some theology; it just made little difference in her everyday existence. She had prophecy charts, but they did little to comfort her broken heart.

6. Is that not very much the same way that most people view their relationship to Christ? For them, knowing Jesus is something that will be valuable in eternity, but is of very little importance to them today, and in this present life.

7. Far too many people, like Martha, have a faith that is more like a 401K, or an IRA, than it is like a checking account. They hope that one day they will be able to fall back on their faith, but they do not draw from it for each day's needs.

8. Martha's faith loved to sing *Farther Along*, but her faith was flawed because it had not yet learned to sing:

*Day by day, and with each passing moment,  
Strength I find to meet my trials here*

9. In the conversation with Jesus, we see not only the flaw of Martha's faith, but also further:

#### **B. The fulfillment of Martha's faith**

1. While Martha could only see hope in a future, distant, general resurrection, the Lord Jesus drew her from prophecy to the present and said, "I am the resurrection and the life..."

2. Martha's hope had rested in *something* that would happen *someday*. Jesus said to her, "Your hope is not something; it is Someone! Your hope isn't waiting on a point in the future. Your hope is standing here today!"

3. Jesus said, "Martha, *I am* what you are waiting for. *I am* the fulfillment of all your hopes. *I am* the realization of all your expectations."

4. He had not come to Bethany to *give* resurrection and life. He Himself *was* the resurrection and the life. He didn't come to give Martha hope; He was Martha's hope!

5. If you have believed the gospel, then you are not waiting for something; you are living for Someone! Trusting Christ is not the means to an end; it is the end!

6. If you have Jesus, then you have everything! You have been blessed with "all spiritual blessings...in Christ".

7. Warren Wiersbe says, "When you are sick, you want a doctor and not a medical book or a formula. When you are being sued, you want a lawyer and not a law book. Likewise, when you face your last enemy, death, you want a Savior and not a doctrine written in a book."<sup>v</sup>

8. Martha had a doctrine, but did not realize that the fulfillment and embodiment of that doctrine was the person of Jesus Christ! Her expectations (and ours as well) are all fulfilled and realized in Jesus!

1. Within a few moments of Martha's conversation with Jesus, Lazarus would be raised from the dead, and the words of Christ would take on new meaning for Martha.

2. I am sure Martha remembered the question Jesus asked her. He said in verse 26, "Believest thou this?" That is a good question for all of us.

3. Do you really believe that Jesus is in fact the resurrection and the life? Do you believe that your crisis is real to Him? Do you believe that knowing Him transforms the meaning of life? Do you really believe that having Him is the answer to all your needs?

4. Whether you are a mourner like Martha, or just someone trying to survive the struggles of this world, the words of Jesus in John 11 are essential and timeless. "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?"

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<sup>i</sup> Barclay, William, *The Gospel of John –Vol. 2*, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975), p. 91

<sup>ii</sup> Meyer, F.B., *Gospel of John*, (Oliphants, London, 1970), p. 168-169

<sup>iii</sup> Mitchell, Larry, *Chico State philosophy professor gives ideas about meaning of life*, 12/15/08, *ChicoER.com*, accessed 1/3/08, [http://www.chicoer.com/news/ci\\_11234381](http://www.chicoer.com/news/ci_11234381)

<sup>iv</sup> Jones, J.D., *The Lord of Life and Death*, (Hodder and Stoughton, London,) p. 168

<sup>v</sup> Wiersbe, Warren, *Be Alive*, (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1986), p. 137