

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The seven "I Am's" - "I am the Resurrection and the Life"

Earlier this year, my wife and I were invited to the wedding of two of our young friends. It was lovely to be able to share in something of their happiness that day. Three days later, we were at the funeral of a much loved older friend. That was a much sadder occasion, although the sadness was tempered by the joy of knowing that, as a Christian, our friend was now at home with his Lord.

Many of you will have known times like these when the joy and the sorrow, which make up this tapestry of life, are highlighted by their close proximity. The Bible puts it this way: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4).

This morning, we are going to think about the fifth of the I AM statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Here it is: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). In previous broadcasts, we have been reminded that in the words "I am", Jesus claims that great name of God which was first revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:14). Last week, we looked at the fourth of these statements: "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). That statement had to do with Jesus' sacrificial death at Calvary. Today, we are confronted by this statement of His glorious resurrection power!

The setting for this statement is the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This is the seventh, and final, miracle of Jesus recorded in John's Gospel. The first miracle in this Gospel is the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2). In these two miracles, the Lord Jesus shows His deep concern for us, and His ability to come in and share with us in all the circumstances of life, whether they be joyful or sad. It is noteworthy that the word used by John for "miracle" is, strictly translated, "sign". All seven miracles, or signs, in John's Gospel are pointers to the divine authority of Jesus. Over and above the demonstration of physical power, they also point to a far more significant spiritual work which Jesus can still work in us today.

The family at Bethany, Martha, Mary, and their brother, Lazarus, were well known to Jesus. They would appear to be amongst His best friends. He was certainly welcome in their home. It was only natural, then, that when Lazarus fell ill, the sisters should send a message to Jesus, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick" (John 11:3). Are we as ready to turn to the Lord Jesus, when trouble threatens, as Martha and Mary were? A well-known hymn puts it this way:

*"What a Friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!"*

And when we find help in this way, do we remember to say "Thank you" to the Lord Jesus for help received?

It is striking that at the very outset of this story, we are reminded of the love of Jesus. Not only can the sisters speak of their brother as being loved by Jesus, but John goes on to emphasise: "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus" (John 11:5). The life and ministry of the Lord Jesus plainly show His love for mankind. Very few individuals, however, are specifically named as being loved by Him. There was a rich, young ruler who, sadly, found the pull of his riches too great to follow Jesus. Of him, Mark tells us: "Then Jesus beholding him loved him" (Mark 10:21). John frequently describes himself in his gospel as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (see John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20). Paul gratefully declares: "The Son of God ... loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

So when this family at Bethany is specifically singled out as being loved by Jesus, we can be absolutely sure that, however this story is going to unfold, it will be because Jesus loves them! Some of us, from childhood days, have been glad to sing:

*"Jesus loves me, this I know
For the Bible tells me so."*

But in adult days, too, as Christians we need continually to remind ourselves that the circumstances which come into our lives, come because God loves us. Paul puts it this way: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

But Jesus didn't go to Bethany straight away. In fact, we are told that He waited for two more days. While bringing blessing to others was high on Jesus' priorities, He had a higher priority - to do His Father's will in His Father's time. So He tells the disciples, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby" (John 11:4). Only when Lazarus was dead would Jesus finally go to Bethany. Why? Because He loved them! God had far more wonderful things to show to this family than the simple relief of a brother's illness!

A little later, when Peter protested at Jesus washing his feet, the Lord had to say to Peter, "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter" (John 13:7). These same words might well be written over this Bethany family. We, too, need to take them to heart when, beset by trouble, we cry out, "Why, Lord?"

When the time was right, Jesus sets off for Bethany with His disciples. Not even the protests of His disciples that it was dangerous for Him to go into those parts could stop Him now. What did it matter that others had recently sought to stone Him? As a child of twelve, He had said to Mary and Joseph, "Didn't you know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). That had always been the controlling principle of His life. In a heart-warming declaration of solidarity, Thomas, so often maligned as doubting Thomas, says to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16).

As Jesus and His disciples approach Bethany, Martha rushes to meet Him. "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died" (John 11:21), she exclaims. While there is life, there is hope, seems to have been Martha's philosophy. But now Lazarus was dead, and it was too late. But the One with power to heal her brother when he was ill, now stands before Martha with resurrection power at His disposal! Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

Mary uses the same words as her sister, Martha. But Mary seems to have had that quiet confidence in her Lord that enabled her to sit quietly at home until Jesus sent for her. Faced with Mary's tears, and those of the many friends who came with her, we read, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). These marvellous words, this shortest verse in the Bible, speak volumes. Yes, Jesus felt, with perfect sympathy, for Mary, Martha and the others. But He felt, perhaps even more deeply, the terrible havoc which sin had wrought in God's fair creation. Here was the visible evidence of those consequences of sin, of which God had so solemnly forewarned Adam and Eve in Eden: "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17).

All this, Jesus felt in Himself here at Bethany. A little later, at Calvary, He would not only feel, but bear in His own body on the tree that solemn judgment of God against sin: Martha's sin, Mary's sin, Lazarus' sin, my sin, and your sin. Only in this way could resurrection life and power come to sinful mankind.

When John writes, "Jesus wept", under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he uses a word which means literally "shed silent tears". This word is unique in the New Testament. This action is peculiar to Jesus. Here alone is perfect sympathy. These were not the loud, sham tears of those professional mourners so often hired at funerals in Jesus' days. Mark tells us about the behaviour of those mourners when Jairus' daughter died. Here was genuine sorrow and total understanding of the deep grief of Martha and Mary. "What a Friend we have in Jesus" indeed!

While "Jesus wept" is the shortest verse in our English Bible, it is interesting that in the Greek New Testament, the shortest verse is 1 Thessalonians 5:16: "Rejoice evermore". These two verses encompass the whole breadth of human emotion. They show us that the God who made us after His likeness (Genesis 1:26) is concerned with our every emotion. The onlookers, seeing the tears of Jesus, could only remark, "Behold how he loved him" (John 11:36).

Jesus comes to the cave where the dead body of Lazarus had been laid and commands that the stone be taken away from the entrance. Martha protests that Lazarus had been dead for four days and corruption must now have set in. Jesus says to her, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldst believe, thou shouldst see the glory of God?" (John 11:40). The world says, "Seeing is believing". The divine order is just the opposite: To believe is to see. Thomas believed in Jesus' resurrection after he saw Jesus and the marks of Calvary in His hands and side. But Jesus pronounced a special blessing to include us in our day: "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

In front of that open tomb, Jesus cries with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth" (John 11:43). "And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes" (John 11:44). It has been well remarked that if Jesus had not specifically limited that call to Lazarus, such was the authority and power of that command that every dead body in that burial ground must have answered to it and come out alive! Here was demonstration indeed that the Lord Jesus is

in very truth the Resurrection and the Life. Only God Himself, in the Person of His Son, could have the power to bring life to a dead body. In this picture, we have a marvellous foretaste of that day when the Lord Jesus will come to take His people to be with Himself: "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16 and 17). Oh, to hear His voice on that day!

As Lazarus came forth, Jesus commands those standing by, "Loose him, and let him go" (John 11:44). The same mighty Saviour who had summoned Lazarus from death could easily have divested Lazarus of a few graveclothes. But in marvellous grace, Jesus enlists others in His work of deliverance. Jesus does the same today. He would enlist us to join Him, through the preaching of the Gospel, in setting men and women, boys and girls, free from the graveclothes of sin.

It is noteworthy that on no fewer than three occasions in the Gospels do we read of Jesus raising the dead. A little girl, Jairus' daughter, who had just died, is restored to her parents (Mark 5:22-43). A young man, son of a widow of Nain, was on his way to be buried when Jesus stopped the funeral cortege and restored him to his mother (Luke 7:11-18). Now here, finally, Lazarus is restored to his sisters. Paul opens his epistle to the Romans with the dramatic statement: "Jesus Christ our Lord ... declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:3 and 4). While the unique resurrection of Christ Himself stands as ultimate witness of His divine authority, these three occasions stand alongside that in striking confirmation of His Person.

It is little wonder, then, that the whole focus of the preaching of the early disciples was on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. So Peter could declare before the Jewish authorities: "Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 4:10). Christian preaching today needs to centre on these two vital themes.

The raising of Lazarus produced two conflicting responses. The enemies of Jesus, including the chief priests and the Pharisees, had no difficulty in accepting the reality of what Jesus had done. They certainly did not deny Jesus' resurrection power! They saw Jesus as a very real threat to their position. Caiaphas, the high priest, in the dreadful name of expediency, counsels, "It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not" (John 11:50). But John, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, goes on to add those beautiful words: "This spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; and not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad" (John 11:51-52).

But in John 12, we read of the grateful response of the Bethany family: "There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him. Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment" (John 12:2-3). Service, fellowship, worship - all were gratefully offered to the Lord that day! Those of us who know the Lord Jesus as Saviour today may bring those same offerings to Him.

Finally, we should notice that Jesus claimed to be not only the Resurrection but also the Life. We are spiritually dead in sins. His death at Calvary dealt with those sins. Through faith in Him, we can enter into a new life - a life lived in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God, a life lived in fellowship with God. "I am come that ye might have life and that ye might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10), He could say.

We need to remind ourselves that this resurrection power of the Lord Jesus is not just something which has been demonstrated in the past, nor only that which will be seen in the future when He comes for His own. This resurrection power is to be seen and known today in the lives of all those who belong to the Lord Jesus. So Paul prays, "Christ Jesus my Lord ... that I may know him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto His death" (Philippians 3:8-10). This was Paul's prayer for himself in the present. Likewise, Paul prays for the Christians at Ephesus that God would here and now show "the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead" (Ephesians 1:17-20).

A prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You that You still are the Resurrection and the Life. Help us to know You more fully in this way today: Amen.

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