

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
11:38-46

38. Then Jesus, again groaning in himself, came to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. 39. Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to him, Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been *dead* four days. 40. Jesus said to her, Did I not say to you that if you would believe you should see the glory of God? 41. Then they took away the stone *from the place* where the dead was lying. And Jesus lifted up *his* eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42. And I know that you always hear me, but because of the people who are standing by I said *it*, that they may believe that you have sent me. 43. And when he had said these things, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth! 44. And he who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, and his face was wrapped with a napkin. Jesus said to them, Loose him, and let him go. 45. Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in him. 46. But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus had done.

38.--[*Then Jesus...came to the grave.*] The word rendered "groaning" is the same that was used at the 32nd verse, and the same remarks apply to it. The only difference is that here it is "groaning in Himself" and there "groaning in the spirit." This, however, confirms my impression that in the former verse "in the spirit" simply means "inwardly and spiritually," and that the general idea is "under the influence of very strong inward emotion."

The site of the grave, we need not doubt, was outside the village of Bethany. There was no such thing as interment within a town allowed among the Jews, or indeed among ancient nations generally. The practice of burying the dead among the living is a barbarous modern innovation, reflecting little credit on Christians.

Calvin remarks: "Christ approaches the sepulchre as a champion preparing for a contest; and we need not wonder that He groans as the violent tyranny of death, which He had to conquer, is placed before His eyes."

Ecolampadius and Musculus think that the unbelieving, sneering remark of the Jews in the preceding verse is the reason why our Lord "again groaned." Bullinger thinks that the renewed emotion of our Lord was simply occasioned by the sight of the grave.

[*It was a cave...upon it.*] Graves among the Jews seem to have been of three kinds. (1) Sometimes, but rarely, they were holes dug down into the ground like our own (see Luke 11:44). (2) Most frequently they were caves hewn horizontally into the side of a rock, with a stone placed against the mouth. This was most probably the kind of new tomb in which our Lord was laid. (3) Sometimes they were caves in which there was a sloping, downward

descent. This appears to have been the description of grave in which Lazarus was buried. It says distinctly that "a stone lay upon it."

No doubt these particulars are specified to supply incidental proof of the reality of Lazarus' death and burial.

39.--[*Jesus said, Take ye away the stone.*] The expression here conveys the idea of "lifting up" to take away. It is the same word that is rendered "lifted up" in verse 41.

The use of this word greatly strengthens the idea that the grave was a descending cave and not a horizontal one. When our Lord rose again, the stone was "rolled away from the door," and not lifted up (Matt. 28:2).

By calling on the crowd of attendants to take away the stone, our Lord effected two things. Firstly, He impressed on the minds of all engaged the reality and truth of the miracle He was about to perform. Everyone who lent a hand to lift the huge stone and remove it would remember it and become a witness. He would be able to say, "I myself helped to lift up the stone. I myself am sure there was no imposture. There was a dead body inside the grave." In fact, we cannot doubt that the smell rising from the bottom of the cave would tell anyone who helped to lift the stone what there was there. Secondly, our Lord teaches us the simple lesson that He would have man do what he can. Man cannot raise the soul and give life, but he can often remove the stone.

Flacius points out the likeness between this command and the command at Cana to fill the waterpots with water (John 2:7).

That the stones placed at the mouth of graves in Palestine were very large and not easily moved, we may see from Mark 16:3.

[*Martha, the sister of him, etc.*] This is a remarkable sentence and teaches several important things.

(a) It certifies, for the last time, the reality of Lazarus' death. He was not in a swoon or a trance. His own sister, who had doubtless seen him die and closed his eyes, declares before the crowd of onlookers that Lazarus had been dead four days and was fast going to corruption. This we may well believe in such a climate as that of Palestine.

(b) It proves beyond a reasonable doubt that there was no imposture, no collusion, no concerted deception arranged between the family of Bethany and our Lord. Here is the sister of Lazarus actually questioning the propriety of our Lord's order and publicly saying in effect that it is no use to move the stone, that nothing can now be done to deliver her brother from the power of death. Like the eleven Apostles, after Jesus Himself rose, Martha was not a willing and prepared witness but a resisting and unwilling one.

(c) It teaches, not least, how much unbelief there is in a believer's heart at the bottom. Here is holy Martha, with all her faith in our Lord's Messiahship, shrinking and breaking down at this most critical point. She

cannot believe that there is any use in removing the stone. She suggests, impulsively and anxiously, her doubt whether our Lord remembers how long her brother has been dead.

It is not for nothing that we are specially told it was "Martha, the sister of him that was dead," who said this. If even she could say this and raise objections, the idea of imposture and deception becomes absurd.

Some writers object to putting the full literal meaning on the Greek word rendered "stench." But I can see nothing in the objection. We need not suppose that the body of Lazarus was different to other bodies. Moreover, it was just as easy for our Lord to raise a corpse four days' dead as one only four hours' dead. In either case, the grand difficulty to be overcome would be the same: viz., to change death into life. Indeed, it is worth considering whether this fact about Lazarus is not specially mentioned in order to show our Lord's power to restore man's corrupt and decayed body at the last day, and to make it a glorious body.

Let us note here what a humbling lesson death teaches. So terrible and painful is the corruption of a body, when the breath leaves it, that even those who love us most are glad to bury us out of sight (Gen. 23:4).

Musculus suggests that Martha had so little idea what our Lord was going to do that she supposed He only wanted to see Lazarus' face once more. This is perhaps going too far.

The Greek for "dead four days" is a singular expression and one that cannot be literally rendered in English. It would be, "He is a person of four days," and it may possibly mean, "He has been buried four days." Raphelius gives examples from Herodotus and Xenophon which make it possible that it means either dead or buried.

Lightfoot mentions a very curious tradition of the Jews: "They say after death the spirit hovers about the sepulchre, waiting to see if it may return to the body. But when it sees the look of the face of the corpse changed, then it hovers no more but leaves the body to itself." He also adds: "They do not certify of the dead, except within three days after decease, for after three days the countenance changes."

40.--[*Jesus said to her, Did I not, etc.*] This gentle but firm reproof is remarkable. It is not clear to what our Lord refers in the words "Did I not say."

(a) Some think, as Rupertus, that He refers to the message He sent at the beginning: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God."

(b) Some think that He refers to the conversation He had with Martha when she first met Him outside Bethany.

(c) Some think that He refers to words He had often used in discoursing with Martha and Mary on former occasions.

The point is one which must be left open, as we have no means of settling

it. My own impression is that there is probably a reference to the message which our Lord sent back to the sisters at first, when Lazarus was sick. I fancy there must have been something more said at that time which is not recorded, and that our Lord reminded Martha of this. At the same time I cannot doubt that our Lord constantly taught the family of Bethany, and all His disciples, that believing is the grand secret of seeing God's glorious works. "If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes." "He did not many mighty works because of their unbelief." (Mark 9:23, Matt. 13:58.) Unbelief, in a certain sense, seems to tie the hands and limit the power of omnipotence.

Let us note that even the best believers need reminding of Christ's sayings and are apt to forget them. "Said I not unto thee." It is a little sentence we should often call to mind.

41.--[*Then they took away the stone...lying.*] Martha's interruption seems to me to have caused a little pause in the proceedings. She being the nearest relative of Lazarus, and having probably arranged everything concerning his burial, and provided his tomb, we may well believe that her speech made the bystanders hesitate to move the stone. When, however, they heard our Lord's solemn reply and observed that she was silenced and made no further objection, "then" they proceeded to do what our Lord desired.

Hall remarks: "They that laid their hands to the stone doubtless held still awhile, when Martha spoke, and looked one while on Christ, another while on Martha, to hear what issue of resolution would follow so important an objection."

[*And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said.*] We now reach a point of thrilling and breathless interest. The stone had been removed from the mouth of the cave. Our Lord stands before the open grave, and the crowd stands around awaiting anxiously to see what would happen next. Nothing appears from the tomb. There is no sign of life at present, but while all are eagerly looking and listening, our Lord addressed His Father in heaven in a most solemn manner, lifting up His eyes and speaking audibly to Him in the hearing of all the crowd. The reason He explains in the next verse. Now, for the last time, about to work His mightiest miracle, He once more makes a public declaration that He did nothing separate from His Father in heaven, and that in this and all His works there is a mysterious and intimate union between Himself and the Father.

We should note how He suits the action to the word. "He lifted up His eyes." (Compare John 17:1.) He showed that He was addressing an unseen Father in heaven.

[*Father, I thank...heard me.*] This is a remarkable expression. Our Lord begins with "thanks" when man would have expected Him to offer prayer. How shall we explain it?

(a) Some think that our Lord refers to prayer He had put up to the Father concerning the death of Lazarus, from the moment that He heard of his illness, and to His present firm conviction that those prayers had been heard and were going to receive a public answer.

(b) Others think that there is no reason to suppose that our Lord refers to any former or remote prayer; that there was a constant, hourly, minutely communication between Himself and His heavenly Father, and that to pray and return thanks for the answer to prayer were actions which in His experience were very closely connected.

The subject is a deep and mysterious one, and I shrink from giving a very positive opinion about it. That our Lord constantly prayed on all occasions we know from the Gospels. That He prayed sometimes with great agony of mind and with tears we also know (Heb. 5:7). But how far He could know anything of that peculiar struggle which we poor sinners have to carry on with doubt, fear, and anxiety in our prayers, is another question altogether and very hard to answer. One might suppose that One who was as man, entirely holy, humble, and without sin, might be able to thank for prayer heard almost as soon as prayer was offered. Upon this theory the sentence before us would be plain: "I pray that Lazarus may be raised, and I thank You at the same time for hearing my prayer, as I know You do."

And yet we must not forget two of our Lord's prayers not granted, apparently: "Father, save Me from this hour;" "Father, let this cup pass from Me." (John 12:47 and Mark 26:29.) It is, however, only fair to say that the first of these prayers is greatly qualified by the context, and the second by the words "If it be possible."

We may note here as elsewhere what an example of thankfulness as well as prayerfulness our Lord always supplies. Well if it was followed! His people are always more ready to ask than to thank. The more grace in a heart the more humility, and the more humility the more praise.

Chrysostom remarks: "Who now ever prayed in this manner? Before uttering any prayer, He said 'I thank Thee,' showing that He needed not prayer." He also says that the real cause of our Lord saying this was to show the Jews He was no enemy of God but did all His works according to His will.

Origen observes: "If to those who pray worthily is given the promise in Isaiah, 'You shall cry, and He shall say, Here I am,' what answer think we could our Lord receive? He was about to pray for the resurrection of Lazarus. He was heard by the Father before He prayed; His request was granted before it was made; and, therefore, He begins with thanks."

Musculus, Flacius, and Glassius think that our Lord refers to prayer He had been putting up secretly when He was "groaning in spirit and troubled," and that He was then wrestling and agonizing in prayer, though those around Him knew it not. We may remember that at the Red Sea we are not told of any audible prayer Moses offered, and yet the Lord says, "Why do you cry to Me?" (Exodus 14:15.)

Quesnel observes: "Christ being about to conclude His public life and preaching by the last and most illustrious of His miracles, returns solemn thanks to His Father for the power given to His human nature to prove the authority of His mission by miracles."

Hall observes: "Words express our hearts to men, thoughts to God. Well did

You know, Lord, out of the self-sameness of Your will with the Father's, that if You did but think in Your heart that Lazarus should rise, he was now raised. It was not for You to pray vocally and audibly, lest those captious hearers should say, You did all by entreaty, and nothing by power."

42.--[*And I know that You always hear me, etc.*] This verse is so elliptical that the meaning can hardly be seen without a paraphrase. "I do not give Thee these thanks as if I had ever doubted Thy willingness to hear Me; on the contrary, I know well that Thou always hearest Me. Thou dost not only hear all my prayers as Man, both for myself and my people; Thou dost also ever hear Me, even as I hear Thee, from the mystical union there is between the Father and the Son. But I have now said this publicly for the benefit of this crowd of people standing by the grave, in order that they may see and believe for the last time that I do no miracle without Thee, and that I am the Messiah whom Thou hast sent into the world. I would have them publicly hear Me declare that I work this last great work as Thy Sent One, and as a last evidence that I am the Christ."

I cannot but think there is a deep meaning about the expression, "Thou hearest Me always." (Compare John 5:30.) But I admit the difficulty of the phrase and would speak with diffidence.

It is impossible to imagine a more thorough open challenge to the attention of the Jews than the language which preceded the raising of Lazarus. Before doing this stupendous work, our Lord proclaims that He is doing and speaking as He does to supply a proof that the Father sent and commissioned Him as the Christ. Was He the "Sent One" or not? This, we must always remember, was the great question of which He undertook to give proof. The Jews, moreover, said that He did His miracles by Beelzebub; let them hear that He did all by the power of God.

Bullinger remarks that our Lord seems to say, "The Jews do not all understand that union and communion between Me and Thee by which we are of the same will, power, and substance. Some of them even think that I work by the power of the devil. Therefore, that all may believe that I come from Thee, am sent by Thee, am Thy Son, equal to Thee, light of light, very God of very God, I use expressions of this sort."

Poole remarks: "There is a great difference between God's hearing of Christ and hearing us. Christ and His Father have one essence, one nature, and one will."

The following miracles were wrought by Christ without audible prayer and with only an authoritative word, Matt. 8:3, 9:6, Mark 5:41, 9:25, and Luke 7:14.

Wordsworth observes: "Christ prayed to show that He was not against God nor God against Him, and that what He did was done with God's approval."

43.--[*And when...cried...come forth.*] In this verse we have the last and crowning stage of the miracle. Attention was concentrated on the grave and our Lord. The crowd looked on with breathless expectation. And then,

while they looked (having secured their attention), our Lord bids Lazarus come forth out of the grave. The Greek word for "He cried" is only in this place applied to any voice or utterance of our Lord. In Matt. 12:19 it is used, where it is said of our Lord, "He shall *not cry*." Here it is evident that He purposely used a very loud, piercing cry, that all around might hear and take notice.

Theophylact thinks that Jesus "cried aloud to contradict the Gentile fable that the soul remained in the tomb with the body. Therefore the soul of Lazarus is called to as if it were absent, and a loud voice were necessary to summon it back." Euthymius suggests the same reason. This, however, seems an odd idea.

On the other hand, Brentius, Grotius, and Lampe suggest that Jesus "cried with a loud voice" to prevent the Jews from saying that He muttered or whispered some magical form or words of enchantment, as witches did.

Ferus observes that our Lord did not say, "In the name of my Father come forth," or "Raise Him, O my Father," but acts by His own authority.

44.--*[And he who had died came forth.]* The effect of our Lord's words was seen at once. As soon as He "cried," Lazarus was seen coming up out of the cave before the eyes of the crowd. A more plain, distinct, and unmistakable miracle it would be impossible for man to imagine. That a dead man should hear a voice, obey it, rise up and move forth from his grave alive is utterly contrary to nature. God alone could cause such a thing. What first began life in him, how lungs and heart began to act again suddenly and instantaneously, it would be a waste of time to speculate. It was a miracle, and there we must leave it.

The idea of some, that Lazarus moved out of the grave without the use of his legs, passing through air like a spirit or ghost, seems to me needless and unreasonable. I agree with Hutcheson, Hall, and Pearce that, though "bound hand and foot," there is no certain proof that his legs were tied together so tightly that he could not move out of the grave, though slowly and with difficulty like one encumbered, on his own feet. The tardy, shuffling action of such a figure would strike all. Pearce remarks, "He must have come forth crawling on his knees." We are surely not required to multiply miracles. Yet the idea that Lazarus came out with a supernatural motion seems to be held by Augustine, Zwingle, Ecolampadius, Bucer, Gualter, Toletus, Jansenius, Lampe, Lightfoot, and Alford, who think it part of the miracle. I would not press my opinion positively on others, though I firmly maintain it. My own private feeling is that the slow, gradual, tottering movements of a figure encumbered by grave clothes would impress a crowd far more than the rapid, ghostlike gliding out in air of a body of which the feet did not move.

*[And his face was wrapped with a napkin.]* This is mentioned to show that he had been really dead and his corpse treated like all other corpses. If not dead, he would have been unable to breathe through the napkin for four days.

*[Jesus said to them, Loose him, and let him go.]* This command was given

for two reasons: partly that many around might touch Lazarus and see for themselves that it was not a ghost but a real body that was raised, and partly that he might be able to walk to his own house before the eyes of the multitude as a living man. This, until he was freed from grave clothes and his eyes were unbandaged, would have been impossible.

Very striking is it to remark how in the least minute particulars the objections of infidels and skeptics are quietly forestalled and met in Gospel narrative! Thus Chrysostom remarks that the command to "loose him" would enable the friends who bore Lazarus to the grave to know from the grave clothes that it was the very person they had buried four days before. They would recognize the clothes. They could not say, as some had said in the case of the blind man, "This is not he." He also remarks that hands, eyes, ears, and nostrils would all convince the witnesses of the truth of the miracle.

45.--[*Then many of the Jews...believed in him.*] This verse describes the good effect which the raising of Lazarus had on many of the Jews who had come from Jerusalem to comfort Mary and Martha. Their remaining prejudices gave way. They were unable to resist the extraordinary evidence of the miracle they had just seen. From that day, they no longer denied that Jesus was the Christ. Whether their belief was faith unto salvation may well be doubted; but at any rate they ceased to oppose and blaspheme. And it is more than probable that on the day of Pentecost many of those very Jews whose hearts had been prepared by the miracle of Bethany came boldly forward and were baptized.

We should observe in this verse what a signal blessing God was pleased to bestow on sympathy and kindness. If the Jews had not come to comfort Mary under her affliction, they would not have seen the mighty miracle of raising Lazarus and perhaps would not have been saved.

Lampe remarks on these Jews: "They had come as the merciful, and they obtained mercy."

Besner observes the beautiful delicacy with which St. John draws a veil over the effect on Martha and Mary of this miracle, while he dwells on the effect it had on strangers.

46.--[*But some of them went...Jesus had done.*] We see in this verse the bad effect which the raising of Lazarus had on some who saw it. Instead of being softened and convinced, they were hardened and enraged. They were vexed to see even more unanswerable proofs that Jesus was the Christ, and irritated to feel that their own unbelief was more than ever inexcusable. They therefore hurried off to the Pharisees to report what they had seen and to point out the progress that our Lord was making in the immediate neighborhood of Jerusalem.

The amazing wickedness of human nature is strikingly illustrated in this verse. There is no greater mistake than to suppose that seeing miracles will necessarily convert souls. Here is a plain proof that it does not. Never was there a more remarkable confirmation of our Lord's words in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus: "If they believe not Moses and the

Prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Musculus observes what a wonderful example we have here of the sovereign grace of God, choosing some and leading them to repentance and faith, and not choosing others. Here is the same miracle, seen under the same circumstances and with the same evidence, by a large crowd of persons. Yet while some believe, others believe not! It is like the case of the two thieves on the cross both seeing the same sight, one repenting and the other impenitent. The same fire which melts wax hardens clay.

In leaving this wonderful miracle, there are three things which demand special notice.

(a) We should observe that we are not told of anything that Lazarus said about his state while in the grave and nothing of his after history. Tradition says that he lived for thirty years after and was never known to smile; but this is probably a mere apocryphal invention. As to his silence, we can easily see there is a Divine wisdom about it. If St. Paul "could not utter" the things that he saw in the third heaven and called them "unspeakable things," it is not strange that Lazarus should say nothing of what he saw in Paradise (2 Cor. 12:4). But there may be always seen in Scripture a striking silence about the feelings of men and women who have been the subjects of remarkable Divine interposition. God's ways are not man's ways. Man loves sensation and excitement, and likes to make God's work on his fellow creatures a gazing-stock and a show, to their great damage. God almost always seems to withdraw them from the public, both for their own good and His glory.

(b) We should observe that we are told nothing of the feelings of Martha and Mary after they saw their brother raised to life. The veil is drawn over their joy, though it was not over their sorrow. Affliction is a more profitable study than rejoicing.

(c) We should observe, lastly, that the raising of Lazarus is one of the most signal instances in the Gospels of Christ's Divine power. To Him who could work such a miracle, nothing is impossible. He can raise from the death of sin any dead soul, however far gone and corrupt. He will raise us from the grave at His own second appearing. The voice which called Lazarus from the tomb is almighty. "The dead shall hear the voice of the Son of Man, and they that hear shall live" (John 5:25).