

TAKE AWAY THE STONE

John 11:38-44

Turn in your Bibles to * John 11:38-44. (Read)

* “Take away the stone.” “Lazarus, come out!” “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

We love to read about miracles and talk about miracles. We love to tell others that we believe in miracles. We would love to see the manifestation of God’s power in the church. That’s one reason why people tend to wander from one church to another - they’re looking for the excitement, the power of the Holy Spirit. They’re looking for signs and wonders. They want to see the power of God.

I don’t know about you, but I love to see the power of God. I think we all would like to see more of that power, but are we ready to fully commit ourselves to God and to His work?

God expects us to do our part. Throughout scriptures we read many conditional passages, or “if - then” passages.

2 Chron 7:14 “IF my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, THEN I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

1 Jn. 1:9 “IF we confess our sins, (THEN) he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Deut. 4:29 “IF from there you seek the Lord your God, (THEN) you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

In this miracle that we’ve read in our scripture passage this morning, we find that there are three parts, or three stages to this miracle. We also find that two of the three parts of this miracle were done by the members of Lazarus’ family.

As we look at this passage in a moment, I think we’ll find that these three stages are similar to a lot of areas in our life.

Take a wedding, for example. The family does all the preparations up to the day of the wedding, then the pastor intervenes at the time of the ceremony, then the reception and conjugal life takes place. We certainly don’t expect the pastor to do all three things.

If one of our children get sick. We first do all that we can do for him, including calling and taking him to the doctor. The doctor intervenes in the diagnosis and prescription of the medicine, then it is up to us to give the medication as directed. Again, it’s not the doctor that is responsible for all three stages.

In the church when we talk about evangelism, we have the stage of preparation up through the preaching of the message, then the Holy Spirit intervenes at the point of decision, then we have the follow up and discipleship process to do.

Once again, like the other examples, it is not God that does all of it. It's at the moment of conversion, when it is beyond our ability to do anything, that God intervenes.

With that in mind, let's take a look at our story of Lazarus. It's found in John chapter 11.

We find Jesus with his disciples moving towards Jerusalem and shortly before arriving, Jesus hears the news that Lazarus was sick. In the reading of these verses we find that Jesus had quite a close relationship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Verse 11:5 tells us * that: *"Jesus loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus."* If we look back at verse 2 we find that it was, *"This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, * was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair."*

This would seem to indicate that Jesus probably had already spent quite a bit of time with this family. It was because of this close relationship that the two sisters sent him a message informing him of Lazarus' illness. For them to do that, it would indicate that he was probably quite seriously ill.

You know, there are many times, as we read through the gospels, that we find Jesus saying things or doing things that seem to be incomprehensible to those listening to him. This was one of those times. Look at verse 11:6. * *"When he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days."* Why?

Usually if we hear that a loved one or a close friend is very sick, we would try to do everything possible to go visit him or her. Not Jesus. He waited two more days, until Lazarus was dead, before he went to their home.

In doing this, however, Jesus had a purpose. We find it in * verse 4. *"When he heard this, Jesus said, This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."*

Jesus was preparing his disciples for what he was going to do. After two days, Jesus said to his * disciples, (11:11) *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."*

Of course the disciples assumed that Jesus meant that Lazarus was sleeping, so Jesus had to be very blunt and said, "Lazarus is dead." He then proceeds to give them a second purpose for allowing this to happen.

In verse 11:15, * Jesus says, *"Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."* * SO THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE. That is the most important ingredient for all that God does - belief, faith.

We pick up the story at verse * 17 (11:17). *"On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days."* Four days in the tomb - I think Jesus wanted to make sure that everyone knew that Lazarus was good and dead.

If anyone thought that Lazarus had just fainted and maybe woke up in the cool of the tomb, they would've realized that wasn't possible after four days.

The passage goes on to say that many Jews had come from Jerusalem to console Mary and Martha. In reading the text we find that many of the people there were not real happy with Jesus.

Martha was the first to go meet him. In verse 21 * she says, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."* Then in verse 32 * we read, *"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.'

Again in verse 37, talking about the crowd * it says, *"But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'"*

Do you recall the second purpose that Jesus gave to * his disciples? *"So that you may believe."*
When Martha said to Jesus that if he had been there, her brother would not have died, Jesus told her in verse * 23, *"Your brother will rise again."*

Now, Martha's response to this statement of Jesus' was similar to those that we often make. She spoke as a believer that didn't have a lot of confidence in what she believed. (Repeat).

She says in verse *24, *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

You see, she didn't believe that Jesus was talking about 'right now'. It is so easy for us to couch our 'beliefs' in terms that make us comfortable. We don't like to have our faith tested. As long as our belief is not tested, our faith is still in tact. We often couch our prayers in words that won't make us disappointed if we don't see results.

Our faith, however, is theoretical and remains theoretical until it's put to the test and put into action. That's one of the things that James is speaking about when he says, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." What good is faith if you don't do anything with it?

Jesus says to* Martha, *"I am the resurrection and the life....Do you believe this?"*(11:25,26) Martha responds to him in verse 27 by * saying, *"Yes Lord, I believe."*

Yes, Lord, I believe. Her faith was absolutely necessary before Jesus performed His miracle.

Often we're the same way and do and say the same kind of things. We pray because we are Christians and Christians are supposed to pray, but I fear that too often we pray without faith.

If God answers - great! If He doesn't answer, well, that doesn't tend to bother us too much because, most probably it wasn't God's will in the first place.

My friends, I believe that often God doesn't respond to our prayers or doesn't answer our prayers because we don't really believe that He's going to.

Jesus asked Martha, "Do you believe this?" She answered, "Yes Lord, I believe."

It wasn't until this statement of faith was proclaimed that Jesus finally asked, "Where have you laid him?" (11:34) and they took him to the tomb.

Upon arriving at the tomb he found a large stone that had been placed at the entrance as was customary. So what did Jesus do? He said to the * family, *"Take away the stone."*(11:39)

This is always the second step in a miracle. Couldn't Jesus, being the Son of God Almighty, say to the stone, "Move away", and wouldn't the stone have moved? Of course he could have and of course it would have.

Jesus, however, wanted them to exercise their faith. Martha had already expressed her faith verbally by saying, "Yes I believe", but now Jesus wanted her to put her faith into action. So he said to them, "Take away the stone." This was the test of their faith. In order for this miracle to take place, the stone had to be moved away.

"Take away the stone." Martha, who had just recently said, "Yes I believe," said, "But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days!"

She had said that she believed, but she didn't want to put her faith to the test. My friends, the greatest hindrance to moving that stone, is unbelief - the lack of faith.

Jesus had to remind Martha of what He had said. In verse 40 he says, *"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"*

This is another one of those "if-then" statements which strongly implies that if you do not believe, then you will not see the glory of God.

Let's read verses 41-42 (read). You see, it is all hinged on our faith, our belief.

Upon the removal of the stone, Jesus lifted up a prayer of thanksgiving, and then with a loud voice, Jesus called out, * "Lazarus, come out."

Can you imagine the looks of astonishment as a man, dead four days, comes walking out of the tomb looking like a mummy with strips of linen wrapped around his hands and feet and a cloth around his face. What a shock! What a miracle. Why? Because their faith was put to the test and then put into action.

Jesus wasn't done with them yet. He gave them another command. * "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." (vs. 44b).

Again, Jesus himself could have untied him. But he wanted the family to do what they could do.

Lazarus had just received a new life but he was still tied up and encumbered by the wraps of death. It was now up to the family to help free him from all of that and help him to live a life of liberty! - That's a whole 'nother message to be preached.

So what?

So what's the point of this message today? It all has to do with that stone.

We need to put our faith into action. It's at that point, and only at that point, that we will see the power and glory of God at work.

Every situation that seems impossible and insurmountable, is an opportunity for God to be glorified - but the stone has to be taken away first! It's up to each one of us.

We want to see God work in a wonderful way in the church - but what are we doing about it?

We want to grow in our faith - but so many of us don't attend Bible studies, don't attend prayer meetings. Church is a kind of take it or leave it proposition.

We pray that God will work in a mighty way and we would love to see some miraculous things take place - but too often our faith is theoretical, we don't really believe that He can or will do it.

We pray, and perhaps there are some that even fast in order that God would fix the problems in the church - but we our ourselves aren't obeying God's word in every aspect of our lives.

We don't want to be bothered. We don't want to do anything.

Perhaps we pray for our neighbors - but when was the last time you went over and befriended them and talked to them about what Christ has done for you?

We pray that God would fix the problems that we're having at home - but we don't want to take our own personal responsibility to love as a husband or submit as a wife. We don't want to deal with the sin in our own life.

We want God to change the way that our children behave - but we keep getting angry at them and yelling at them. We ourselves don't want to practice self control - one of the fruits of the Spirit.

But we keep praying! We keep fasting. We keep wanting God to do miracles and we continue to ask why we don't see the power of the Holy Spirit at work.

People talk about churches being dead! Why? Because the stone is still in place. God is saying to * us: "Take away the stone."

Do you want God to work a miracle in the church, in your family, in your life? Do you believe that He can do it? Take away the stone. Put your faith into action.

** "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" - It's up to you.*