Lesson: John 11:17-32; Time of Action: 30 A.D.; Place of Action: Bethany

Golden Text: “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” (John 11:25).

I. INTRODUCTION. Although more than 150,000 people die every day throughout the world, humans were not created to die. In the Garden of Eden, Adam was created perfect, without sin or death. After his fall into sin, physical and spiritual death was the result and for centuries to come, men, women, and children would die, some earlier than others. This is always a painful event, especially when someone close to us dies. Like most people, if not all, Martha and Mary had first-hand experience with death when their brother Lazarus died (see John 11:21). This event was not only painful for these two sisters, but also for Jesus (see John 11:35). However, death was not the end of the story, for Jesus was about to show that His power over death, is also victory over death.

II. THE LESSON BACKGROUND. This week’s lesson takes place about two months after Jesus came to Jerusalem for the
Feast of Tabernacles that was celebrated during the Jewish month of Tishri which relates to September-October on our calendar (see John 7:1-2, 10). At this time, during the winter, the Jews were celebrating the Feast of Dedication (see John 10:22). This festival, now called Hanukkah, is celebrated in December to commemorate the restoration of the temple in the time of Judas Maccabeus and the Jewish revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes in 164 B.C. During this feast, Jesus went to the temple and was confronted by the religious leaders who demanded that He plainly admit that He was the Christ, or the Messiah (see John 10:22-24). Instead of directly declaring that He was the Christ, Jesus reminded them that He had already told them who He was but they didn’t believe Him. Then Jesus proceeded to tell them who were His sheep and that the religious leaders were not among His sheep (see John 10:25-29). But when Jesus said “I and my Father are one” (see John 10:30), these Jews attempted to stone Him again, accusing Him of blasphemy (see John 10:31-34). As He had done earlier, Jesus escaped out of their hands (see John 8:2-59) and went to Perea, beyond or east of the Jordan (see John 1:28; 10:40) and spent some time there (see John 10:39-42). Perea was about twenty miles from Bethany. Chapter 11 opens with the revelation that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha was sick (see John 11:1). Jesus truly loved this family (see John 11:5; 11:36), so when Lazarus became sick, his sisters sent word to Jesus about his condition. When the messenger arrived to Jesus with the sisters’ message, Jesus responded by saying “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby” (see John 11:4). Finally, two days later, Jesus suggested that He and His disciples go back
to Judaea to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. This decision caused the disciples to question why Jesus would want to go back to Judaea at that time since they tried to stone Him the last time He was there (see John 11:7-8; 10:31-40). Surely, they thought it was not safe to go back! But Jesus took this moment to teach them that He only had a certain amount of time to do His Father’s will and for them not to be afraid since they had the Light of the world with them (see John 11:9-10). Then Jesus told His disciples that Lazarus was sleeping and He was going to wake him up. The disciples then told Jesus as long as he is sleeping he is doing well. But they thought Jesus was saying that Lazarus was resting in his sleep (see John 11:12-13). Then Jesus plainly told them that Lazarus was dead, and that it was good for them that He was not there when it happened (see John 11:15). Jesus’ delay would ultimately increase their faith. Thomas then encouraged the others to all go back to Judaea with Jesus even if it meant their deaths (see John 11:16). Our lesson begins with verse 17.

III. THE DEATH (John 11:17-19)

A. Death and burial (John 11:17). Our first verse says “Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already.” As noted in the Lesson Background, Jesus was in Perea, east of the Jordan (see John 1:28; 10:40) when a messenger from Mary and Martha brought Him word that Lazarus was sick (see John 11:3). After Jesus received the message, He waited two days before
going to Bethany to be with His dear friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. When Jesus arrived in Bethany, “he found that he had lain in the grave four days already.” It probably took the messenger a day to get to Jesus, and Jesus waited two more “days” before leaving for Bethany. The trip would probably take about a day. Considering this time breakdown, we can understand how Lazarus could have “lain in the grave four days already.” By the time Jesus and His disciples arrived, Lazarus had already been in the tomb “four days.” This would indicate that Lazarus probably died the same day the messenger arrived where Jesus was.

B. Comforting friends (John 11:18-19).

1. (vs. 18). This verse says “Now Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off.” Here John tells his readers that “Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off,” meaning that “Bethany” was close to “Jerusalem” about two miles away. It was necessary to know how far “Bethany” was from “Jerusalem” because John was about to reveal in the next verse how many people attended Lazarus’ funeral.

2. (vs. 19). This verse says “And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.” The closeness of Bethany to Jerusalem explains why “many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.” We are told that “many of the Jews” came from Jerusalem to Bethany “to comfort” these sisters in the loss
of “their brother.” In the minds of everyone present, the death of Lazarus had left his sisters with no hope of ever seeing him alive again. So they were there to provide whatever comfort they could. Since the climate of the land caused rapid deterioration of a body after death, it was customary for Jews to bury their dead as soon as possible, normally the same day (see John Luke 23:44-53; 19:38-42). However, the mourning usually lasted for at least a week. By the time Jesus and His disciples arrived, the people were already mourning. 

**Note:** One of the greatest joys of being believers in Jesus Christ is knowing the “comfort” we can give one another in times of sorrow. How different it is for those who are without Christ! We have a hope they don’t have, the hope of seeing our loved ones again. This is what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the Thessalonian believers about their friends and relatives who had died: “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope” (see I Thessalonians 4:13). What Mary and Martha didn’t know at the time was that Jesus was coming to give them more than a hope for the future. Most of us can identify with the sorrow in that home that day. Who among us has not known the pain of losing one we love dearly? Even though we know the LORD and know that the one who died has gone to be with Him, our humanity causes us to experience the emotional pain of such a loss. This incident is going to allow us to look into the very heart of Jesus who when He saw the sorrow of His friends could not help weeping with them (see John 11:35). This is assurance that He can comfort us in times of
sorrow (see II Corinthians 1:3-4)!

IV. THE PROMISE (John 11:20-23)

A. A disappointment (John 11:20-21).

1. (vs. 20). This verse says “Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house.” At this point in the narrative we are told that “as soon as Mary heard that Jesus was coming” she left the house to go meet Him. In contrast to Martha’s actions, John wrote, “but Mary sat still in the house.” This certainly fits the picture of what we know about “Mary” and “Martha.” In Luke 10:38-42, we are told about an earlier time when Jesus visited their home. At that time “Martha” hustled around preparing a meal while “Mary” quietly “sat” in front of Jesus and listened to Him teach. When Martha complained that Mary was not helping her, the LORD commended Mary for what she was doing. “Martha” was an activist; “Mary” was a contemplative person. It was “Martha,” the activist who immediately left the house to go meet Jesus.  **Note: The fact that “Mary” remained in the house helps us understand the process of the mourning period a little better. The Greek word “kathezomai” means “to sit down.” It was the custom of those who were bereaved to remain seated in the house as their guests came and sat in silence with them. There might be tears and moans and in some cases open wailing and loud mourning (see**
Mark 5:38). “Mary” chose to remain where she was while “Martha” left. Since we are not told if “Mary” knew about Jesus’ coming, we shouldn’t be quick to criticize her.

2. (vs. 21). This verse says “Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.” When “Martha” met “Jesus,” her first words to Him were an expression of regret and confidence for she said “unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.” She regretted that “Jesus” had not arrived in time to heal Lazarus. She probably knew that her “brother” was dead before “Jesus” received word about his sickness, so this was not a complaint against Him. Instead, it was an expression of confidence. She knew that if the “LORD” had been there, her “brother” would not have “died.” Since “Jesus” had been known to heal others, she was confident that He would’ve also healed her “brother.” As we shall see later in the text, Mary made this same comment to “Jesus” (see John 11:32). Both Mary and “Martha” had strong faith in Jesus in spite of the pain they were experiencing. **Note:** We may wonder if Martha’s statement to Jesus indicated that she was expressing hope that Jesus would revive her brother. But the rest of the conversation between her and Jesus indicates that she was not thinking that way. Instead, she must have been expressing confidence in the fact that Jesus’ will was being accomplished in spite of her sorrow. That’s the same kind of confidence we can have today. I don’t know anyone who enjoys going through sorrowful experiences, but since we as believers know
that God is in complete control of our situations, we can have confidence in His ability to help us. Unlike Martha, we don’t have Jesus physically standing beside us, so we must live in faith that His perfect will is being done.

B. A promise (John 11:22-23).

1. (vs. 22). This verse says “But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.” Martha’s words here seem to confirm that in the previous verse she was not expressing hope that Jesus would revive her brother, but she was expressing confidence in the fact that Jesus’ will was being accomplished in spite of her sorrow. This seems to be the case as she said to Jesus “But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.” This was an affirmation of Martha’s faith. She was confident that Jesus’ Father was always pleased with Him, so even though her brother was dead, “God” would “give” Jesus whatever He asked Him for. She was confident that if Jesus had been there and asked His Father to spare Lazarus’ life, “God” would have done it. Maybe she thought death was so final that she didn’t consider the possibility of Jesus reversing it, especially after several days had passed.

2. (vs. 23). This verse says “Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.” In response to Martha’s statement of faith in the previous verse, “Jesus” made a promise to her by simply saying, “Thy brother shall rise again.” Since we already know what happened next,
we know that Jesus meant that Lazarus would “rise” from the dead right away. But Martha didn’t understand His statement that way. She understood resurrection in the light of Old Testament teachings. One would think that Martha would have heard of the other times when Jesus raised someone from death, for example Jairus’ daughter (see Mark 5:41-42) and the son of the widow in Nain (see Luke 7:11-15). But for the moment, Jesus’ words “Thy brother shall rise again” did not give Martha any immediate comfort as we shall see from her response in the next verse.

V. THE REASSURANCE (John 11:24-27)

A. Resurrection promised (John 11:24-25).

1. (vs. 24). This verse says “Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” When “Martha” heard Jesus’ words “Thy brother shall rise again,” in the previous verse, her response to Him was, “I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Of course Jesus was thinking of the immediate situation, but she interpreted His words to refer to the future “resurrection” that will take place “at the last day” or during the end times. She was thinking of “resurrection” the way the Old Testament refers to it (see Isaiah 26:19-20; Daniel 12:2-3; John 5:28-29). “Martha” knew a “resurrection” was coming, but knowing that didn’t help her pain and sorrow that day. So she had to assume that she was to look ahead and wait for the future
time when she would see Lazarus again. The Bible is clear that we must cling to the truth about the future “resurrection” when we find ourselves in times of sorrow over the death of a loved one (see I Thessalonians 4:13-18). Jesus died for us and rose from death guaranteeing eternal life after death for all who receive Him as personal Savior. There is a time coming when we will be reunited with our saved loved ones and freed forever from such separation.

2. (vs. 25). This verse says “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” Here we have the fifth of the seven “I am” statements spoken by “Jesus” recorded in the Gospel of John (see John 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). In response to “Martha’s” words in the previous verse, “Jesus” said that He was two specific things: “the resurrection, and the life.” Jesus on another occasion had declared that He was the Good Shepherd and had the power to lay down His own life and to take it up again (see John 10:18). But not only would He arise from death, He would also be the source of resurrection for all who die. The “resurrection” is not just an event, it is a Person. Jesus said “I am the resurrection.” Eternal “life” is a Person as well, for Jesus also declared “I am the life.” This is proof of Jesus’ deity, and our guarantee of eternal “life” is Jesus. Note: In the Bible, death always refers to separation. Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body, and eternal death is the separation of the person from God forever. Those who have received Jesus as Savior might experience physical death, but they will never experience eternal death.
Jesus died to save us from eternal death and our relationship with Him promises us “life” in heaven forever. In the last part of this verse Jesus said “he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” The LORD promises eternal “life” to the person who “believes” in Him (see John 5:21; 6:39-40); the non-believer doesn’t have that promise. “Resurrection” power is who Jesus is, so He could confidently say that even if those who believe in Him “were dead” or die, “yet shall he live;” they will live again. For those who “believe in Jesus,” the truth is that physical death may come, but eternal death never will!


1. (vs. 26). This verse says “And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believeth thou this?” It would be very difficult for those outside of God’s family to understand what Jesus meant when He said “And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” With maybe the exception of Elijah (see II Kings 2:10-12), reality reveals to us that everyone who lives on earth dies, without any exceptions. That includes believers as well as unbelievers. So, when Jesus said “And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die,” He was referring to spiritual death instead of physical death. In addition, this was a strong statement declaring that all believers in Jesus Christ will never, ever experience separation from God. Once we become part of God’s family through faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, we will never lose that family relationship. From that moment on, we have eternal life (see John 3:16; 5:24; 10:28). In the last
part of this verse, Jesus asked Martha “Believest thou this?” With this question, Jesus was giving Martha the chance to make a confession of faith like He did the former blind man (see John 9:35-38). We should not overlook the compassion and sensitivity that our LORD showed to Martha. Even though she came to Him with sorrow, regret, and maybe a hint of disappointment, Jesus never rebuked her. Instead, He responded to her with kindness and comforting truth.

2. (vs. 27). This verse says “She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.” In response to Jesus’ question in the previous verse “Believest thou this?” Martha said to Him, “Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.” Her answer, revealed a deep genuine faith in Jesus when she called Him “the Christ” (the Anointed One or the Messiah) and the “Son of God.” Martha’s conversation with Jesus causes her to make a confession of faith that was very similar to the one that Peter gave (see Matthew 16:16). Now Martha understood that Jesus was the promised Messiah “which should come into the world,” but she still had no clue that Jesus intended to raise her brother very soon. But at this point, her heart was now at ease and her faith would soon be vindicated when Jesus would miraculously raise Lazarus from the dead (see John 11:41-44).

VI. THE DOUBT (John 11:28-32)
A. Mary is summoned (John 11:28-30).

1. (vs. 28). This verse says “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.” The words “And when she had so said” refer to Martha’s confession of faith to Jesus in the previous verse. After her confession of faith, “she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly.” This simply means that Martha quietly took “her sister” aside, away from the mourners. John does not tell us why Martha spoke to “her sister secretly” or quietly, but it’s quite possible that it had to do with Jesus’ enemies. Undoubtedly, as close as this family was to Jesus, they had to know that the Jewish religious leaders were looking to arrest or even kill Him (see John 7:10-13, 25; 8:37, 40; 10:31). Then, Martha quietly said to “Mary her sister” that “The Master is come, and calleth for thee.” There is no record in the Gospels that Jesus “called” for “Mary,” but He probably did out of a natural concern for how she was doing. It’s interesting that Martha referred to Jesus as “The Master” after she had declared Him to be “the Christ, the Son of God” (see verse 27). This was not an inappropriate description of Jesus since “Master” means teacher, and Jesus had just taught her much about life and death.

2. (vs. 29). This verse says “As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came unto him.” Martha probably whispered to Mary that Jesus wanted to see her so “As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came unto him.” Knowing that Jesus was waiting to
speak with her, Mary got up in a hurry and went to where Jesus was.

3. (vs. 30). This verse says “Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met him.” Here John interjects the fact that “Jesus was not yet come into the town.” In other words, He was waiting for Mary just outside the town of Bethany, probably to avoid contact with any opposing religious leaders who may have come to pay their respects to Mary and Martha. We are also told that Jesus was waiting for Mary in the same “place where Martha met Him” (see verse 20).

B. Mary’s adoration (John 11:31-32).

1. (vs. 31). This verse says “The Jews then which were with her in the house, and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there.” When “Mary” left her house to meet with Jesus, those who were mourning with her followed her thinking that she was going to “the grave to weep there.” But “Mary” didn’t go to Lazarus’ grave. Instead, she went to meet Jesus outside of town followed by the mourners who “comforted her” (see John 11:33-34).

2. (vs. 32). Our final verse says “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.” When “Mary” reached the place where “Jesus” was waiting for her, “she fell down
“at his feet” showing a more dramatic expression of her emotions than her sister, Martha had shown earlier (see verse 20). “Mary” said the exact same thing to “Jesus” that Martha had said to Him (see verse 21), “Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.” It may be that the sisters had been sharing this same thought with one another. Like her sister’s similar statement to Jesus (see verse 21), Mary’s statement was not a complaint against Him. Instead, it was an expression of confidence and regret. Although Mary said the same thing to Jesus that Martha had said, she didn’t add an expression of faith as Martha had (see verse 22). But before we attempt to condemn Mary for that, the fact that “she fell down at his feet” may suggest that she had a similar attitude as her sister. Note: The next few verses which are not part of our printed text reveal that Jesus didn’t answer Mary like He did Martha. He simply remained quiet, being troubled and groaning in His spirit as He watched Mary and her fellow mourners weeping (see John 11:33). Then Jesus asked where had they laid Lazarus’ body, and “Jesus wept” (see John 11:34-35). Oftentimes when we are trying to comfort someone, the best and most comforting thing we can do for that person is to say nothing. It can be enough just to do as Paul wrote to the Romans: “weep with them that weep” (see Romans 12:15). Yes, Jesus did respond to the two sisters differently, but it was because He had the wisdom to know what kind of help each sister needed the most. This teaches us that like Jesus, we must always be sensitive to the circumstances and to the person we are trying to comfort.
VII. Conclusion. Jesus’ friend Lazarus had died. The occasion of his death provided Jesus with an opportunity to make another of His great self-revealing statements. To a grieving sister, Jesus said “I am the resurrection and the life” (see John 11:25). All of us were born into the world spiritually dead and programmed to die physically. As we come to believe in Jesus, we immediately receive spiritual life and the promise of a physical resurrection to come. Those who believe don’t have to fear death. It’s because of Jesus that all believers will one day have victory over death through the resurrection life that Jesus gives.

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