

IS YOUR HOPE DEAD OR ASLEEP?

Today's Text: Jn 11: 1- 44

Extracts:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister [Mary] and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was....So when Jesus came, He found that [Lazarus] had already been in the tomb four days.... Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died, but even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again" [Jn 11: 5-6, 17, 20-23].

On Saturday, 23 July 2011, a 50-year-old South African man was presumed dead by his family members after all attempts to wake him up had failed.¹ They contacted a private morgue in Libode Village in the Eastern Cape Province and the health officials there put the dead man's body in the mortuary. However, when two attendants later returned and called for an ambulance, they were frightened to hear the 'dead man' demanding to be let out of the chilly morgue where he had spent almost 24 hours. Reacting to the story later, an Eastern Cape Health official, Sizwe Kupelo, said, "We need to get the message across to all South Africans that it is wrong for them to conclude on their own that a person has died."

Does that story sound familiar to you? In some societies, people are buried as soon as they are pronounced dead. In such places, that South African man would have been buried alive. Do you know how many of your hopes and aspirations have been hurriedly buried because you have concluded that they are dead? Who told you they are dead? Is it not possible that they are just in a coma? Are you patient enough to turn the hopeless into the unbelievable? I have great news for you. Two thousand years ago, the family of a man brought word to Jesus that His friend called Lazarus was sick and at the point of death. Jesus did not respond until the sick man had been dead for four days and had actually been buried! Jesus told the mourning family not to fear, that Lazarus was not dead but asleep! Is your hope dead or asleep? Let us find out from this week's exciting study.

¹ Based on: "South Africa: 'Dead man' wakes up inside morgue," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14275271> ; 25 July 2011

1. Background: Was Lazarus dead or asleep?

In most societies, happily, it takes medical experts to pronounce people dead. That way, the error of burying people alive is minimized. Unfortunately, there are certain forms of death which individuals have power to pronounce on without medical or even expert advice. One such death is in the area of hope. Many of us bury it once we believe that it is hopeless. Your spouse has just packed out of your marital home; therefore, your marriage has failed and it is over! You have attempted a certification test several times and failed; therefore, you may never make it and why try it again? The doctor says that your sickness is incurable and death is imminent; therefore, it is good bye to living. You have been unemployed for the past six months and there is no hope for a new job even as you have run out of unemployment benefits; therefore, depression or alcohol is your best bet. Is it really true that all is over? Is your hope really dead or merely asleep?

In this week's Bible text, Jesus was invited to come quickly to Bethany, about two miles away from Jerusalem, to the home of Martha and Mary, whose brother, Lazarus was sick to the point of death [**Jn 11: 1-2, 18**]. When the sisters sent word to Jesus, they said, "Lord, behold, *he whom You love is sick*" [v. 3]. When you are in an emergency your family members call the emergency code [e.g., 911]. Those who respond may neither know nor love you. Therefore, how they respond may depend more on mechanical compliance than their feelings or emotions. *Martha and Mary* already had a close relationship with Jesus [**Lk 10: 38-42**]. He was their family friend. Therefore, their appeal was to Christ's heart, not His head. They *were not asking for a doctor but for a miracle*. Their case was worse than hopeless. Let us follow the story:

a) *The sisters' hope had actually died!*

We are told, "When Jesus came, He found that [Lazarus] had already been in the tomb four days" [v. 17]. They had "bound him hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth" [v. 44]. They laid his body in a tomb that was a cave, with a stone against it [v. 38]. At the time of the arrival of Jesus, there was a stench because Lazarus had been dead for four days [v. 39]. Family and friends had come to commiserate with Martha and Mary, the dead man's sisters [v. 31]. Therefore, there was no doubt that Lazarus had *actually* died. By human standards, all hope of his being revived had gone. The sisters' hope had actually died!

It is natural to throw up our hands of despair into the air when we face such situations. It is over and there is nothing else to do about it. Yes, you can mourn. You can regret. You can feel terrible. For example, when the Amalekites sacked David's camp in Ziklag and carried away his and his troop's families, he and the people "lifted their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep" [**1 Sam. 30: 1-4**]. When Jacob was shown by his sons the blood-soaked tunic of his favourite son, Joseph, he "tore his

clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days” [Gen. 37: 31-34]. But should you give up or move on? That is your next challenge.

What you hope for can influence how you react to bad news. Martha, the sister of Lazarus, believed in the resurrection of the dead and she knew that her brother would rise again “in the resurrection at the last day” [Jn 11: 24]. David also had a spiritual anchor. After weeping bitterly, to the point of the threat of being stoned by his men, he strengthened himself in the Lord his God [1 Sam. 30: 6]. When the Shunammite woman’s only son died of a sun stroke, she put him on the bed of the prophet Elisha and went looking for the man of God. When her husband asked her where she was going, she replied, “It is well” [2 Kgs 4: 18-23]. When heavily armed troops from Ammon, Moab and other countries surrounded Judah, King Jehoshaphat “feared and set himself to seek the Lord, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah” [2 Chron. 20: 1-3]. ***Lazarus’ sisters mourned their brother’s death but they awaited Jesus who would have a hope-lifting answer for them!***

b) *But Jesus said that the sisters’ hope was merely asleep!*

When Jesus perceived that Lazarus had died, He told His disciples, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.” His disciples took Him literally and they said to Him, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get well.” Then Jesus spoke plainly to them, “Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him” [vv. 11-14].

Some of us cope with bad news by displacing. For example, we refuse to accept it. Sometimes, we think that we can change God’s mind to conform to the desires of our hearts by challenging Jesus to make His words happen for them where He once said, “Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it” [Jn 14: 13-14]. We tend to focus on the ***whatevers*** and ***anythings*** but Jesus emphasized glorifying His Father! Lazarus was asleep to the extent that Jesus was going to bring him back to life. Martha expected her brother back alive at the resurrection of the dead on the last day but Jesus expected her brother back alive *that day!* ***If it is in God’s will, He will confirm to you or through His messengers that your hope is not dead but only asleep.*** As Jehoshaphat prayed before the temple in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit came on a prophet in their midst who told the king, “Thus says the Lord to you: ‘Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God’s’” [2 Chron. 20: 14-15]. Jesus says that your hope is not dead but only fast asleep!

c) *Jesus woke up the sisters' hope from sleep!*

Jesus showed His human qualities when He came to the home of Martha and Mary and felt their pains. He wept and the Jews who saw Him do so said, "See how He loved him!" [Jn 11: 33-36]. He assured the sisters that their brother would rise again, not on the last day, as they had hoped, but right away because the Lord happens to be the resurrection and the life [vv. 23-26]. They showed Him the place where Lazarus had been buried. After thanking His Father for hearing His Son and for showing His glory to the people standing by, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" The dead man came back to life and Jesus said to the bystanders, "Loose him and let him go" [vv. 41-44]. Unbelievable!

You cannot even begin to explain or understand it. We thought it was *difficult* because Lazarus was sick to the point of death. Then, we gave up because it was *impossible* after Lazarus had died and been in the grave for four days. Finally, it was *done*, for we saw that Jesus had raised Lazarus back to life. It was not the faith of Lazarus that did it because he was dead. It was partly the faith of his sisters who cried to their great friend, Jesus, that had taught them about the resurrection of the dead. However, it was mainly for God's glory "that the Son of God may be glorified through it" [v. 4]. Therefore, the matter is in God's hands. But would it not be wonderful if your case were to provide God with the opportunity to glorify Himself?

2. Turning your hopeless into the unbelievable!

Our greatest problem as believers is fear; yet, God has not given us the spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind [2 Tim. 1: 7]. Therefore, unless we are ready to dare, we may not be able to turn our hopeless cases into unbelievable testimonies. Here are some suggestions to guide your walk in that direction:

a) *God will not do for you what you can do for yourself!*

When Jesus came to the place where Lazarus was buried, He said to the people, "Take away the stone." After He had raised him from the dead, Lazarus remained bound hand and foot with grave clothes and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus again said to the people, "Loose him and let him go" [Jn 11: 39, 44]. That is interesting. Are you saying that Jesus could not command the stone to be blasted off the cave or the cords tying the dead man up to be loosed on their own? Yes, He could but He did not because God will not do for you what you can do for yourself! ***It is your responsibility to remove all human gadgets that suggest failure or hopelessness!***

For example, Jesus has said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. ***If anyone hears My voice and opens the door***, I will come in to him and

dine with him, and him with Me” [Rev. 3: 20]. Therefore, if you are in distress and you remain on your knees fasting for days on end and praying in as many tongues as you can imagine, NOTHING will happen because you have refused to hear Him knocking on the door and even if you heard, refused to stand up to go and open the door! So, get off that seat of self-pity and dry your tears. No matter for how long you weep, do you think your tears can fill up a small cup? God cannot force you to obey Him. He will NEVER confess your sins for you. Therefore, ***go beyond your hopeless state by working out what you can and should do to get past it before going to God.***

b) *Go to those who can build your faith*

When you are in distress, many sympathizers will come but not all of them will be helpful for your healing. Some may in fact make you feel worse. For example, Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, were supposed to help him to process the loss of all his children and estate within a short period of time. They sat down with him on the ground for seven days and nights without uttering a word [Job 2: 11-13]. But the moment they began to speak, Job said of them, “Miserable comforters are you all!” [Job 16: 2]. When Jesus came to the home of Jairus whose twelve-year-old daughter had died, the crowd “who wept and wailed loudly” ridiculed Him for saying that the girl was not dead but sleeping! Yet, it took Jesus, not the loudest mourners, to bring true succour to that family when He raised her from the dead [Mk 5: 38-42]. Therefore, ***when you need help, go to those who can build your faith, not those who can add fuel to your fear.***

James has written, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” [Jam. 5: 13-15]. What can be more comforting than that?

c) *Follow your faith, not your fears*

The greatest obstacle to recovery is when you have no idea to what you should recover. You may have tried all you know how or followed the advice of so-called experts and nothing appears to have worked. You may get worked up and irritated because you do not know what next to do. Well, as one popular saying goes, if you keep doing what you have always done, you will keep getting what you have always got! Why not try faith for a change? Faith here means letting God give you the direction in which you should go before you take your first step. For example, after the death of Saul in battle, David who had been a fugitive for over a decade found

himself in a dilemma He had been anointed king of Israel as a teenager. He was now thirty years old. How was he going to be crowned king? He did not go to the political or military leaders of Israel. Instead, he inquired of the Lord, saying, "Shall I go up to any of the cities of Judah?" God said to him, "Go up." David followed up with another question, "Where shall I go up?" God replied, "To Hebron." David went to Hebron and there they anointed him king over the house of Judah [2 Sam. 2: 1-4]. He was king there for seven and half years before he was able to overcome the forces of Saul to become king over the whole of Israel [2 Sam. 5: 1-5].

From the forgoing, we can conclude that the ball is in your court. *Your hope is dead if you dwell on past failures and disappointments and let them cloud and crowd your future. Your hope is merely asleep if you learn the right lessons from your past mistakes and rely on faith in God through His only begotten Son, Jesus, to lead you back to full recovery. He has promised you, "He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die"* [Jn 11: 25-26].

3. Conclusion: You are born again into eternal life!

Yes, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead but he died again later- of old age I suppose! But by His own death on the cross, Jesus has borne your griefs, carried your sorrows and been bruised for your iniquities, and by His stripes you are healed [Is. 53: 4-5]. When you accept Him as your personal Lord and Saviour, you get born again into eternal life with Him in His kingdom.

As the temple of the living God, He will dwell within you. You shall neither thirst nor hunger anymore and neither the sun nor heat shall strike you. The Lamb will shepherd you and lead you to living fountains of waters; and God will wipe away every tear from your eyes [Rev. 7: 15-17].

Your hope is not dead; it may only be asleep. Wake it up!