

# The Man God Helped

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I've chosen the title "The Man God Helped" for two reasons. First, because it didn't seem like God was going to help this man at all, and second because that's what his name means literally--"God is my help." In Old Testament times the name was "Eliezer." It's made up of "El," which is a name for God, "i" which means "my" and "ezer" which means "help," as in "Ebenezer," the "stone of help." This name belonged to Abraham's trusted servant, who went in search of a wife for Isaac. It also belonged to a son of Moses and a host of others.

But the story we're look at took place in New Testament times, and because there had been a transition of language, with Greek making a big impact on how people spoke, it wasn't "Eliezer" any more. Do you have any guess who we're talking about? It was Lazarus! That's how "Eliezer" was being pronounced when Jesus walked the earth.

Now this Lazarus, whose name means "God is my help", had become ill. Just because you know Jesus doesn't mean that you won't experience the hardships and pitfalls of this life. Lazarus lived in the little town of Bethany, just a couple of miles from Jerusalem, and it seems that Jesus had befriended him and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, to the point that He frequently spent time with them on His sojourning. They were more than mere acquaintances! That's why the sisters felt confident that things would be okay when their brother got sick; after all, He had healed many people. He seemed to heal just about everybody, even those whom He had never met before. So it was just a matter of getting the word to Jesus that Lazarus, His friend, had fallen ill, and surely Jesus would stop whatever He was doing and hurry to Bethany to bring healing.

When we study this story today, I want to focus on a few key points.

First and foremost, shining through this story in brilliant splendor is the truth of God's love.

Included in this story is valuable insight into the virtue of patience.

Also, we can't read this story without encountering the truth of

what happens when you die.

Very importantly, we see in this story an encouraging reminder that Jesus has the power of life; He has power over the grave.

It was winter, just a few months before the ministry of Jesus on this earth would come to its end. Only a few months before this Jesus had visited Jerusalem during the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, and there had been conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders as to His Messiahship. They had been ready to stone Him because He had claimed to be equal with God.

That brings us to John 11:1-5, "Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the own of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, 'Lord, behold he whom You love is sick.' When Jesus heard that, He said, 'This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus."

It'd be easy to read that last phrase and quickly pass over it. Actually, it's the central theme of the story. It's the most important concept we'll ever entertain in our lifetime. It's also the central theme of the Bible. If you're willing to accept it, it can be the central theme of your life; God's love for you! If we would know and embrace the truth and reality of that principle, nothing else would matter!

But sometimes it's hard to understand God's love. If we were to stop this story after the third day, you might have a hard time putting that phrase "Jesus loved...Lazarus" together with the events as they had played out up to that moment. That's because when Jesus heard this, He *didn't stop* what He was doing and run to Bethany to heal Lazarus. "He stayed two more days in the place He was." John 11:6. That would be hard to understand! I wonder what the messengers from Mary and Martha thought as He continued in His activity and didn't go to Bethany! Was He ignoring their request? Did He care for Lazarus?

Sometimes we're in the same position as were the sisters of Lazarus two or three days into the story. It doesn't seem like God loves you! All the arrows of circumstance seem to point the other way! Your faith and mine would have been tested if we were there. I'm told that one time some old-time advent believers were scheduling an evangelistic meeting, when threatening weather appeared. Someone

said, "Looks like our faith is going to be tested." James White responded, "If this is all it takes to test your faith, you need a stronger faith!"

I'm encouraged that before any of the potentially discouraging things unfold the author states plainly, "Jesus loved...Lazarus." As a beacon-like preface to the rest of the story, as a beautiful melody gracing an overture, the author wants to see everything in the framework of God's love. Whatever happened, however it happened, however long it took to happen, he wants us to know that undergirding the whole event is the foundation of God's love. "Don't lose hope," he's telling us. "Don't give up, no matter how dark the cloudy skies might seem. God loved Lazarus!" God loves you, too! You might just now be in that 2-3 day period, when your life has turned upside down, and you've called out to God, and it seems like nothing is happening. Maybe someone you've loved has suffered an illness, and despite your prayers, healing has not come. Perhaps that loved one has been laid in the grave. It seems like He isn't listening or doesn't care. Have hope! God's love is still there! We need patience to let God's way become evident, even if it seems like a long time. Trust Him in the valleys, as well as the mountaintops.

Then, after what must have seemed like an eternity, Jesus said, "'Let us go to Judea again.'" He said also, "'our Friend **Lazarus sleeps**, but I go that I may wake him up.' Then His disciples said, 'Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.' However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking a rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead.'" John 11:7, 11-14.

I can't improve on the language of Jesus. I don't know more about life and death than He does. I've never experienced passing beyond that dark portal. I believe He is the Lord; I believe He created us; I believe He knows the truth about what happens when we die. It may be very popular to believe that our beloved dead go directly to heaven upon their demise, but it is not supported by the Scriptures or the words of Jesus Christ. Here is clear, unmistakable teaching about what happens when the enemy calls. There is no need for equivocation or ambiguity here. This teaching is so simple a child can understand it.

Let's back up for a minute and review what happened at the beginning. When God gave life to His children Adam and Eve, He told them about freedom of choice and the responsibility that choice brings. In the garden were two trees, two special trees among all the other trees. One was the "tree of life," which had fruit that perpetuated life.

The other was a tree called "the tree of knowledge of good and evil." They were told that they could not eat of it, and that if they did they would incur the sentence of death. Unfortunately, they did, and soon felt the chill of death in the falling of the leaves, and the falling of their son Abel. The Lord had told them, as they were evicted from their garden home, that "to dust they would return." They would experience death. What is death? Death is the cessation of life. It is not life in another form.

Consistently throughout the Bible death is represented as "sleep," which, as we've seen in the word to describe the condition of Lazarus in the grave. In more than 50 occurrences, in both the Old and New Testaments emphasizes this ***unconscious condition at death***. Yes, there are a few exceptions such as Enoch and Elijah who were taken to heaven directly without tasting death. And there is Moses, who though he died, was brought back to life and taken to glory, and those raised when Jesus came from the grave. These exceptions, given for our encouragement are explicitly noted and we need not be confused. However, for the vast majority, the sentence of death pronounced upon mankind because of disobedience has been faithfully carried out.

Why does the Bible call death "sleep"? It's because

When you are in a sound sleep you are **not aware of things happening around you**. Speaking of death, the Bible says that when a man dies, "his sons come to honor, and he does not know it." Job 14:21. The Bible says that when a person dies, "in that very day his thoughts perish." Psalm 146:4. It says that "the living know that they will die, but the dead know not anything." Ecclesiastes 9:5. What will we do when we go to heaven? We will praise the Lord, won't we? And yet the Bible says that "the dead do not praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence." Psalm 115:17. This is what makes the promise of the resurrection so beautiful!

When you are in a sound sleep you are **not aware of the passing of time**. Maybe it's happened to you like it's happened to me that I'll wake up in the night and think that it's almost time to get up, but the clock says it's only 1:30 a.m. Or, it can happen the other way, that I'll wake up and think, "I've got another 4 hours of sleep," when the alarm is about to go off! When Adam is brought back to life, he will be shocked to learn that about 5,000 years have passed since he died. To him it will seem as if he had just closed his eyes in sleep. How comforting

to know that our beloved dead are asleep in Jesus and are resting peacefully, awaiting His voice when He comes back. The Bible tells us that immortality is a gift conferred **when Jesus returns in glory**, and that we don't possess it now.

I Corinthians 15:51-55.

When it's time to go to bed, for most of us, we don't "dread" going to sleep, because we expect to awake refreshed for another day. So for the Christian, whose hope is in the salvation provided by Jesus, **death is not to be dreaded**. This doesn't mean that death is "good." Death is an enemy, brought by sin. But as Christians, we have hope! That's why the Bible says we sorrow, but not as those without hope. I Thessalonians 4:13.

All of these points help us see what God would help us to know about death. And why is this important? What difference does it make? Knowing the truth always has its own rewards. God wants us to know the truth about the basic issues of life and death. More than that, there is a deceiver walking about, wanting to feed us false information. Through the séance, through necromancy Satan is ready to pass on his teachings. Nothing in the Bible receives greater condemnation or warning than attempted communication with the dead. In today's world there is a huge emphasis on piercing the curtain between the here and the hereafter. Look at the number of movies and TV shows which have supernatural contexts. Actually, don't look at them!

Because knowing the truth is paramount, in His mercy, God wants to protect us from any false information that Satan would dispense, so He tells us clearly that the dead are resting unconsciously in their graves. What do you often see on grave stones? It's "Rest In Peace," isn't it? There is a basic truth in that well-worn cemetery marker; there's accurate, biblical truth in the concept of the dead "resting in peace." How confusing it must be for some people to see the marker say "rest in peace," while at the same time hear that their loved one has been taken to glory.

Put these two words side by side; "cemetery" and "dormitory." What do they have in common? They mean the same thing! You might recognize the root of "dormitory" as being a "place of sleep." *Dormir* is the Spanish verb "to sleep." The derivation of the word "cemetery" also literally means "sleeping place." It comes from the Greek *koimao*. So here's something to consider: the word "cemetery" is the *linguistic equivalent* of the word "dormitory." Both mean literally "sleeping place": cemetery coming into our language from a Greek background, "dormitory" from a Latin background. Would it help us to think of our

graveyards as "dormitories" in understanding the truth of what happens when a person dies? It's fully consistent with Bible truth! And by the way, who was it who first said, "You will not surely die"?

Of course, the sisters were disappointed that Jesus had not come earlier. "Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.'" Somehow, they couldn't see past the stone guarding the grave of their brother. It had now been four days since his passing. All of the miracles Jesus had done didn't provide for them the encouragement they needed now. It is true that there were two other occasions when Jesus raised a person from the dead; the son of the widow of Nain, and the daughter of Jairus. But both of these resurrections took place on the day when the person had died. Lazarus had now lain in the grave for four days. In Jewish culture, he was **really dead**. It was past the time anything could be done for him.

With a voice of reassurance Jesus said to Martha, "'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to Him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.'" John 11:23-25.

I don't believe any other person has ever uttered those words. If they did, they had better be able to back them up with appropriate action. **Jesus is the only One** Who has the authority to speak those words. It's important for us to recognize that He does have that authority. What a blessing to believe that there is One Who has power over the grave! It's also important to see that He is the only One Who has that authority.

There may be clever and skillful men of science, and we admire their intelligence, but they **can't create life**. Satan himself is a mighty angel, though fallen, but he can't create life. He may make it appear that he can, through illusion, but he cannot create life. Modern men, through their ingenious endeavors with test-tube babies, through cloning, and all kinds of advancement in the field of technology, still cannot produce that spark which animates and gives life. **Only Jesus** can do that. But Jesus can! He has power over the grave. Jesus is the only One worthy of our worship in that He has created and redeemed us.

Years ago, I wouldn't have thought that it would be necessary to comment on this point, but things have changed. The religions of the world which promote other persons, beings or objects of worship have

made inroads in our country. That which was presumed to be accepted without question, is now being questioned. Now in America, Christianity is just one of many religions. To be able to enjoy the freedom of worship our country provides is wonderful, but it's also sad to see many turning away from the true God to give their devotion to those who do not possess the power of life, as does Jesus.

Last Wednesday evening there was a debate among the Republican candidates for the office of president of the United States. One of the questions posed had to do with how Muslims are looked upon in America. The respondent, former mayor of New York City Rudy Gulianni twice referred to Islam as "that great religion." I want to be respectful of the right to choose given to all people, but I am unable to refer to Islam as "that great religion." This religion does not accept Jesus as the divine Son of God, the Creator and Savior of mankind. It replaces God's great book of truth, the Holy Bible, with another set of writings which contain concepts contrary to the Bible. While it may promote some admirable virtues, it does not uphold the Ten Commandments, God's "hand-written" set of rules to guide us in holy living. In the end, those who accept and cherish the teachings of Islam will find that the path it lays out is not the way to eternal life through Jesus Christ, God's appointed Savior of the world. Any religion which does these things I cannot in all honesty call "great."

Besides these other religions, there are the more "subtle" deities revered in America; the gods of pleasure, materialism and pride; the god of self-awareness and self-sufficiency. Many say with their actions "I can take care of myself; I don't need Jesus." A Christian minister felt a burden to call upon a certain young woman and invite her to accept Christ as her Savior. She said, "I don't need your Jesus." Within a week after this visit from Evangelist Billy Graham, Marilyn Monroe was dead.

How I wished I had my camera with me the day were walking through Chennai and passed beneath a giant billboard which read, "Take home the goddess Lakshmi". In India, she is worshiped as the deity of wealth and beauty. This advertisement was sponsored by an investment group, suggesting that their firm would make you rich. As I walked by, I felt, "How much at home this ad would be in America!" People here worship the god of wealth and beauty here daily. Here, probably few would admit to actually "worshiping" the goddess of wealth and beauty, but over there, it's right out in the open! Yet many today are making it their life goal to "take home the goddess Lakshmi." I'm going to appeal to you to "take home the God Jesus." Always remember, Jesus is our God. In Him we have everything, including the

promise of life eternal. I don't remember reading "I am the resurrection and the life" on that ad.

They made their way to where the grave was, which was basically a cave with a large stone rolled in front of it to protect against grave robbers and animals. As they approached, there were the usual numbers of hired mourners, retained to give the appropriate spectacle of grief. It's interesting that twice in this story; Jesus is reported as expressing sorrow. It says that when Jesus saw Mary and the mourners weeping, "He groaned in the spirit and was troubled." Then at the grave site it says, "Jesus wept." I've often wondered what caused Jesus to be "troubled" and to "weep." I can't believe it was for the same reasons the mourners poured forth their mercenary wailing. They expressed sorrow that Lazarus was dead. This couldn't be the reason Jesus "wept" because He already knew that in just minutes Lazarus would be walking out of that cave. Why then did Jesus weep?

Jesus wept because many of the people failed to see Him as the Messiah. They hadn't come to appreciate Him as God on earth, as Creator God in sandals. After more than three years of ministry, many were still blinded as to His true nature. This made Him sad. He wept because in just a few months some of these very people would be clamoring for His death on the cross. This was not a selfish sadness, but a sorrow over their loss in participating in the most heinous crime the universe would ever see. He wept over those who would not accept His sacrifice for their sins and thus they would be disqualified for the great resurrection to eternal life.

I believe the tears of Jesus still fall today as He witnesses our world, with its fever pitch rush to things that will soon pass away. He weeps as many are turning to gods that can't answer, when He is the Resurrection and the Life. A number of years ago a good friend of mine was pastoring in a church and entertained a well-respected guest speaker, Emilio Knechtel. He had been troubled about a certain matter, but then had a dream in which he saw Jesus. My friend asked Emilio what Jesus looked like, and he said, "He had the saddest face I've ever seen." How He wants to give us the "more abundant life"!

Some bystanders casually commented, with a strange irony, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?" Again, Jesus groaned in Himself at their lack of appreciation for the ways of God. Then Jesus gave the command, "Take away the stone." I've wondered, What are the "stones" that Jesus would have us remove today? Could there be "stones" of

unbelief in our lives that need to be removed? Could there be "stones" of selfish pride that prevent our yielding our hearts to Christ? Could there be a "rock in our shoe" that is hindering our Christian walk?

The Bible says that Jesus offered a simple prayer. If you read this prayer aloud, I doubt that it would take 30 seconds to recite. Fervent prayers don't always have to be long prayers. God knows the heart. If our prayer is given in sincerity and faith, it doesn't have to be hours in length. As Jesus began each day He spent much time in quiet solitude with His Father; sometimes He spent entire nights in prayer. When it came time for something to be done, a short simple prayer is what Christ offered, much like the prayer of Elijah on Carmel.

"Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, **'Lazarus, come forth.'**" Someone pointed out that Jesus made it a specific call by saying "*Lazarus, come forth,*" for had He not done so, graves everywhere would have been opening. Note that **Jesus didn't say, "Lazarus, come down."** If Lazarus had been transported to paradise upon his death, as is the teaching of many today, would it not have been accurate for Jesus to say, "Lazarus, come down"? But Lazarus was not in heaven. He was in the grave. He was "asleep." He was dead. Jesus said, "Lazarus, come forth."

When the voice of the Lifegiver was heard, Lazarus came to life. There is no account of Lazarus regaling all with his "after death experience." His brain had been inactive. There was nothing to report. But now, through Christ, he was alive again! He was, as it turned out, the "man God helped." What rejoicing there must have been as his sisters and friends welcomed him back. He represents all those who will one day soon come from their graves when that Voice is heard again.

There's a reason why Lazarus heard that Voice from the grave; it's because he had made a pattern of listening to it during his life. He had become familiar with that Voice, and it revived him that day in Bethany.

What can we learn from what happened that day that can help us today? Can we also be "Lazarus," "Eliezer," the "one God helps"? First of all, we can be assured that God's love is the envelope, the placenta for spiritual growth. No matter how things may look from the outside, God would have us believe that He loves and cares for us as His children. We can see also that one of the great purposes of this life is to cultivate the virtue of faith. That means to continue to believe

even when it seems He doesn't care. It is within the providence of God that His children experience adverse circumstances, dark moments and valleys in the path of life, to grow to trust Him in all things. Start your day knowing that God loves you, and that no matter what you encounter in that day, He's going to be there with you. Never waver in your confidence in Him. Let patience have her perfect work.

Know that your faith rests firmly in One Who has unlimited power and authority. Jesus has power to create by His Word, and power to bring back those who have been kidnapped by death. We are in a war; a controversy. But we have a Captain Who has already certified victory. Learn to know Him as your Friend. Learn to listen and heed His voice today. Know that those whom we've laid to rest will one day soon be brought back to life by Jesus Himself. They will come forth conquerors over death through Christ. They will be exempt from all consequences and symptoms of sin. They will come forth with the garment of immortality, never again to be challenged by the effects of disobedience. May that day be soon!