

Combating the Relativization of Scripture

Lesson Three

Time as a Relativizing Factor (Part One)

Text: John 11:1-46

BASIC CONTEXT:

1. At the time of the incident under consideration, Jesus had just narrowly escaped the grasp of the infuriated Jews who had attempted to kill Him for His assertions that He was not only the Son of God, but that He also was in the Father and the Father was in Him (John 10:34-39.)
2. It is significant that He decides to stay for a while at the place where John the Baptist had conducted much of his ministry. Here people conclude that, though John's ministry was extraordinary, even that great prophet had not done the kinds of miracles Jesus did (John 10:42). It is out of this milieu of amazement and belief that Jesus quite deliberately sets the stage for His most astonishing miracle yet.
3. It is not clear where Jesus and His disciples are at the beginning of chapter 11 of John. The only thing that is evident is that they are some distance away from Bethany.
4. The Holy Spirit uniquely favors the family of a man named Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. They are identified first by an act of great love which one of the sisters, Mary, had demonstrated by anointing the feet of Jesus (an event which happened subsequent to the raising of Lazarus -- John 12:3). In addition, Lazarus is characterized by the sisters as the one that Jesus loved. Finally, John 11:5 says plainly that Jesus loved these three individuals. All these details indicate a previous and ongoing relationship with this family that was apparently unlike any other relationship with a family in His life.
5. The disciples voice their concerns in two categories at the beginning of this episode. First of all, they do not understand Jesus' deliberate delay. Secondly, they are afraid for His safety and their own if they go back to Judea.

RELATIVIZATION INDEX:

As in previous lessons, at this point we will link elements from the nine categories of relativization. However, in this lesson and the one that follows it, we will concentrate mostly on the category of Time; and a demonstration of how Scripture shows that time is inherently relativized to the Word and the power of God.

APPLICATION TO JOHN CHAPTER 11:

TIME:

- (a) Jesus identifies the illness of Lazarus as neither a random nor an unforeseen event. Nor it is one with an infinite number of possible outcomes. Jesus knows exactly what is happening and what the result will be. Additionally, Jesus says that the significance of the illness of Lazarus is tied directly to Jesus Himself.
- (b) From these facts, we can generalize that the Lord foreknows such traumatic events in the lives of those He loves; that they have meaning beyond the incidences of the situation; and that each such event can provide an opportunity for God to be glorified through it.
- (c) When Jesus does announce His intention to go to the stricken family, He somewhat cryptically – yet undeniably – ties the idea of *time* to the events that are unfolding. Apparently He wants the disciples “tuned in” to the idea of the passage of time and the fact that certain hours are appropriate for certain actions. Perhaps His observation that one can stumble in the dark – and the disciples must have felt that they themselves were being kept in the dark, so to speak – was a cautionary note about trying to draw conclusions without sufficient information.
- (d) After a discussion in which Jesus tried to alert His disciples about how He regarded the death of Lazarus (as temporary as a nap), Jesus again plainly tells the disciples that this incident would be highly charged with significance and with the opportunity for them to grow in faith as events would unfold.
- (e) When Martha meets Jesus outside the city limits of her town, her disappointment with Him is obvious and profound. With a limited understanding of the pan-geographic power of Jesus, she voices her belief that Jesus’ power had been somehow limited by His location or His emotional proximity to His dying friend. Nonetheless, she expresses faith that, in spite of His past inaction, He can do something in the future to ameliorate their pain.
- (f) In the interchange between Mary and Jesus concerning the fact that her brother would rise again, Mary limits the Lord temporally by her misunderstanding about Lazarus’ imminent resurrection. Jesus responds with an even more immediate and startling declaration that this coming event – the Resurrection with a capital R – was housed and embodied in Him at that very moment of time.
- (g) When Jesus arrives at the tomb, the passage of time since the death of Lazarus is of great concern to Martha. She believes that the proposed opening of the tomb will be a repulsive experience.
- (h) Again, in Jesus prayer before the tomb, we see the active interest that Jesus has for maximizing the impact of the event for the building of faith of the observers.

- (i) Jesus emphasized (and, in the minds of the sisters) exacerbated the passage of time to the point of utter hopelessness. Apparently no one believed, nor even dared hope, that Jesus had come to raise Lazarus from the dead -- not even the sisters.
- (j) It is not possible to overestimate the connection between time and resurrection. In scientific circles of even the most technologically adept, no one today can resurrect a human being who has become ill and then died and lain dead in a tomb for four days. From a purely physical point of view – which the sisters expressed – a body that has been dead that long has not simply ceased to function, it has actually regressed in functionality because of decay. Consequently, resurrection would not only have stopped the natural effect of decay, it would have had to actually reverse it. Therefore, what had happened at the point of death, and then one day later, then two days later, and three days later would have had to go *backward* in time, so to speak. Properly viewed, resurrection is a reversal and a restoration of the effects of time and circumstance.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISCOURSE:

Of all elements that affect our discourse, perhaps the passage of time seems the most inevitable, the most inexorable, and the least likely to be relativized to Scripture and the power of God. We face two choices:

- (a) A DISCOURSE THAT TRIES TO RELATIVIZE SCRIPTURE. Time seems to be a fixity. We hear this as “common sense” and inarguable reasoning. It is repeated every day by even the most faithful of our brothers and sisters. They say, “That was yesterday, and you can’t change it.” “The past is the past.” “What’s done is done.” “While there’s life, there’s hope” (which implies that once death occurs, no change can happen.)
- (b) A DISCOURSE SHAPED BY THE REVELATION OF THE LORD. Quite starkly to the contrary, the story of the raising of Lazarus demonstrates that the power of God can reverse even the irreversible. Death itself – the great dead-end of all hope – is not beyond the power of God. Not only must a faithful Christian believe and articulate that the story of Lazarus demonstrates that there are no irreversible processes; we must also acknowledge that kind of power is available today. Furthermore, the coming resurrection of each of our individual bodies is an inevitability spoken of repeatedly in Scripture.
- (c) Early Christians talked about resurrection all the time. If you look at each of the sermons presented in the book of Acts, they are not about baptism or acts of worship or church organization. The point of every single one was this: a Man was born onto this earth to fulfill prophecy, that Man was crucified and laid dead in a tomb for three days, and He was resurrected by God Himself. That pivotal fact of history changed everything, and demands a response from every human being.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Examine the words spoken by individuals, other than Jesus, in this episode with the illness, death and resurrection of Lazarus. How do their comments reflect the ways that they relativized God's power to time and space?
2. Look at John 12:1-11. What were the two types of effects of the resurrection of Lazarus, on the people who either observed it or heard about it?
3. What does Joel 2:25 offer that can help with an understanding of God's view of the effects of time?
4. Read Ephesians 1:18-23. How does this verse demonstrate that the power of resurrection is available to us today?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-19. Given that resurrection is a demonstration of the relativization of time, what implications for your life do you see in these verses?
6. How have you used discourse in a way that shows that you have operated on the assumption that the passage of time is something beyond the power of God, and that Scripture has been relativized to time? What changes can you make to demonstrate your present understanding that time is relativized to the power of God?
7. How does the story of Lazarus demonstrate the ways that two additional categories – history and experience – are relativized to the Lord?