

## Opening Words

Jesus loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary, but that love would be tested to the limits when Lazarus became deathly sick.

### 255 The Grieving Sisters of Bethany 1

Just over the Mount of Olives, about two miles from Jerusalem lay a small village named Bethany. In this town was a family that Jesus loved. In this family was a man named Lazarus and he lived there with his two sisters, Martha and Mary. Jesus had enjoyed their hospitality before. He had enjoyed a meal prepared by the industrious Martha. He had enjoyed the devotion and eagerness to listen and learn by the contemplative Mary, and he had come to love their enterprising brother, Lazarus.

Jesus said to them, “Friends, rarely have I received such warm and loving hospitality in Israel. You have ministered greatly to me. I want you to know that I will always have you in my heart. I will always love you.” Jesus then placed his hand on Lazarus’ shoulder, looked deep into his soul, and said, “Lazarus, no matter what happens, you must know that I will never stop loving you and your sisters. You will always have a special place in my heart.” He then looked at the sisters and said, “Never doubt my love for you.”

Through the months, as the family heard stories about Jesus and his ministry in Galilee, they would rejoice and pray for him. They would discuss their faith that he was the Messiah and they longed for his return to Judea that they might be with him again and learn more of the kingdom.

One night, many months later, Lazarus told his sisters, “Martha, Mary, I am going to retire early. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. My head hurts. I don’t feel well.”

“Sleep well, brother. The Lord’s peace be with you. When you awaken may you find his mercies and be in good health.” But the next morning, Lazarus did not awaken.

His sisters were up and about their business in the house, but when they did not see Lazarus they became concerned. They went to the doorway of his room and said softly, “Lazarus, Lazarus, are you alright?” But all they heard was a groan. The sisters immediately ran to his bedside and found Lazarus burning with fever. They had never felt such fever-heat before.

In Bethany, many skilled people knew how to care for different sicknesses. The sisters sent messengers to ask for some to come and check Lazarus, confident they would know what to do. But they were not prepared for the news they would hear.

“Your brother is gravely ill. Whenever we have tended anyone with such fever and with other symptoms such as he has, well ... it would take a miracle. I fear that his time is near. I am sorry. His life is in the hands of God.”

The sisters burst into tears. “No, this cannot be. He was fine yesterday. Only last night he complained of his head hurting and not feeling well. How can this be?” But the caregiver could only say, “I’m sorry. We will pray.”

As Mary wept, Martha called the servants together and said, “Everyone listen. Lazarus, our brother is gravely ill. He may not last through the day. Do any of you know where Jesus is? Have any of you heard of his whereabouts?”

One of the servants said, “Yes, I believe he is not too far away in a village, perhaps a day’s journey. He has been travelling east of the Jordan and has been making his way in this direction. This is what I have heard.”

“Then go as quickly as you can and bring him. Tell him that Lazarus, the one he dearly loves, is sick and near to death.” Then the sisters went to their brother’s room and tended to his care, praying that the servants would find Jesus and that he would come in time ... and watching as their brother grew weaker as he struggled to live.

The servants prepared for their journey and headed in the direction where they thought they would find Jesus. They went through many villages and inquired as to his whereabouts. Finally, someone said, “Yes, Jesus has been staying in that house over there. In fact, last night he hosted a great dinner for many people. You will find him there.”

The servants were filled with joy when they heard the news and as they approached they recognized some of the men who were Jesus’ disciples. “Please, sirs, we must see Jesus.”

“Who are you and what do you want?” Peter asked.

“We are servants of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. You stayed with us and your master, Jesus, taught in their house some months ago.”

“Yes, yes, I recognize you now and I remember them. Is all well?”

“Sir, the sisters have sent us with urgent news. Their brother Lazarus is sick. They fear for his life. They have sent us with this message,” and they handed a small scroll to Peter. On it were written the words, “Lord, please come quickly! Lazarus, the one whom you love, is sick.”

Just then Jesus emerged from the house and the servants said, “Master, rabbi, please hear us, Lazarus, the one that you dearly love is sick. We fear that he is dying.”

Jesus looked at his disciples and then he turned to the servants and said, “Go, tell them that this sickness is not to end in death. Tell them that his sickness is so that God may be glorified. Tell them that I, the anointed one, the Son of God will find glory through this sickness.”

The servants were overjoyed at this news and they said, “Thank you master, thank you.” And as they prepared to return they paused and looked at Jesus and said, “Well, master, are you coming with us to Lazarus’ home?”

Jesus said, “Tell them this sickness will not end in death. Tell them my Father and I will be glorified by it. Now go.” Then Jesus went back into the house and prayed.

In Bethany, the sisters continued to care for their brother. All that day they anxiously prayed and hoped that their servants would find Jesus. They knew they could not expect them to return until late in the night or early the next morning. And they continued to hope and pray for a miracle, any kind of miracle – for Jesus to come quickly and their brother to get better. Evening came, and Lazarus’ fever worsened. From time to time Martha would go to the entrance of their house and look anxiously down the dark road for a sign of their servants. Then she would return to her brother’s bedside, and Mary would say, “Is there any sign of them sister? Will they find Jesus? Will Jesus come?”

Then, late in the night, they noticed Lazarus’ breathing was becoming shallow. From time to time one of the sisters would place her head next to his mouth to see if he was still breathing. His body was on fire, and they began to lose hope when they heard the sound they had been waiting for. There was shouting at the gates of their estate. The servants had returned!

Martha hurried to the courtyard as the servants were dismounting.

“We have such good news for you Martha! We found him! He said that your brother’s sickness would not end in death. He said that his sickness was for the glory of God.”

“But, but, where is Jesus? Why did you not bring him with you? Lazarus is not better. Lazarus is dying. God has not healed him.”

Just then they heard a loud wail come from the house. It was the voice of Mary, crying out with anguish. Lazarus was dead.