

Let's go to Bethany

January 22nd, 2013, Tuesday Bible Study Meeting
 Gotthold Beck

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John

11:1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

11:2 Mary was the woman who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. Her brother Lazarus was the one who was ill.

11:3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one whom you love is ill."

11:4 But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness is not meant to end in death. It is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

11:5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

11:21 Martha told Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

11:35 Jesus burst into tears.

11:36 So the Jews said, "See how much he loved him!"

11:43 After saying this, he shouted with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

11:44 The man who had died came out, his hands and feet tied with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a handkerchief. Jesus told them, "Untie him, and let him go."

12:1 Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived in Bethany, where Lazarus lived, the man whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

12:2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

12:3 Mary took a pound of very expensive perfume made of pure nard and anointed Jesus' feet. She wiped his feet with her hair, and the house became filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

12:9 When the large crowd of Jews realized that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

12:10 So the high priests planned to kill Lazarus, too,

12:11 since he was the reason why so many of the Jews were leaving to believe in Jesus.
 [International Standard version]

These are very well known verses from the Bible. The 11th chapter of John is one of the most effective chapters for understanding what kind of person Jesus was.

Apparently, it was not so pleasant for Jesus to stay in Jerusalem, especially in temples. He desired to go to Bethany whenever he could. Jerusalem was filled with arrogant people who believed that their belief was righteous, and that they had righteous relationships with the Lord God. Naturally, these people wouldn't want salvation by Jesus.

Bethany is not very far from Jerusalem, and Jesus liked to visit this town. This was because the people of Bethany had ears to hear. "Please talk, Jesus, please enlighten us!" They always were filled with such feeling when they welcomed Him. Jesus preferred to stay in Bethany rather than Jerusalem. There are some other verses that indicate Jesus' love for Bethany:

Luke

24:50 Later, he led them out as far as Bethany, lifted up his hands, and blessed them.

24:51 While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven.

24:52 They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy.

24:53 They were continually in the Temple, blessing God.

Today, I would like to pick up the text from verse 50: "He led them out as far as Bethany," and discuss together with you about it.

The last thing Jesus did after his resurrection was to lead His disciples close to Bethany. This must have been in answer to His prayer from the Father God rather than Jesus' own decision. Jesus must have prayed, "Where should they go? What should I do with them? Please show me." As a result, He was inspired to bring them to Bethany. Jesus led His disciples to Bethany and blessed them, saying, "Now, we arrived at Bethany. Keep this place in your memory for many years to come. Always remember Bethany."

What is the significance of this place called Bethany? As we all know, three siblings—Mary, Martha and Lazarus—lived in Bethany. They had different characteristics. Jesus always loved to visit them in Bethany. When Jesus visited them in Bethany, he

used to take a rest and eat with them. Jesus always looked forward to visiting Bethany.

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Why did Jesus love Bethany so much? Would you like to know the reason, and discuss it together? There were three reasons for his love of the town.

The first reason was their love for the Lord. Mary, one of the three siblings, loved Jesus throughout her life. Jesus was everything to her.

The second reason was their devotion to the Lord. The other sister, Martha, sincerely devoted her life to Jesus.

The third reason was Jesus' power of resurrection. Lazarus was brought back from the dead in their house in Bethany.

Let's look at these three siblings in further detail:

Let's start with Mary. Throughout her life, she loved Jesus. The atmosphere of this house in Bethany can be summarized in one word: love. The Lord Jesus loved these three so much that their neighbors could see His affection for this small family.

Knowing the flawless love of Jesus for them, Mary loved Jesus too—with pure and sincere heart. As is written in the Bible, Mary took the most expensive perfume made of pure nard and poured it out unsparingly on Jesus' head. She showed her pure, supreme love for the Lord when she poured the perfume on Jesus without a moment's hesitation, until every last drop was gone.

"The house became filled with the fragrance of the perfume," as is written in the Bible. Likewise, the house of the three was surrounded with an atmosphere of love. Bethany was filled with love for Jesus. In this village, Jesus too was satisfied with their love. A love like Mary's is what Jesus wants from us more than anything.

Jesus wants to know whether we are willing to devote ourselves and love the Lord from the heart. Let's look at ourselves. Do we look up to Jesus alone? Do we love only Jesus? Or, are we preoccupied by worldly things that keep us from devoting everything to Jesus? When Jesus asks us, "lovest thou me?" can we immediately reply, "yes, I love thee?"

The three siblings in Bethany loved Jesus with undivided and sincere love. This was the reason that

Jesus led his disciples to Bethany right before he was taken up to heaven. Jesus is still looking for Bethany today. Do we have the heart of Bethany, which loves the Lord?

Do we have deep, absolutely undivided and pure love for Jesus in our hearts? Does the first love for Jesus still remain within us? Do we have the same love that filled the house in Bethany?

We have just seen their love for the Lord. Now, I would like to think about Martha, who served Jesus faithfully.

In this home filled with love for the Lord, we can see their sincere devotion to Jesus. Martha prepared meals for the Lord. Do we also serve the Lord, just like Martha? This is not just a matter of whether you devote yourself and render as much services as you can. There is more to it than that.

It is a matter of whether we serve Jesus or not. Try to imagine what was in Martha's mind when she was preparing the meal for Jesus. Would this have pleased Jesus? Would Jesus be satisfied if we do this? Martha's mind must have been occupied with such thoughts. Is Jesus pleased with what we do for Him every time we approach Him? Is He satisfied with our devotion? If He is, we can finally be Bethany—which makes the Lord rejoice.

We can be a place of relief for the Lord. When we think of Mary and Martha, we see two important things that please the Lord: true love and sincere devotion for Jesus.

However, these two things—love for the Lord and devotion to Jesus—are not all our Lord Jesus expects. He expects even greater things from us—although without having this kind of love and devotion first, the Lord cannot lead us further.

[3]

I want to talk about one more thing quickly. It is Jesus' power of resurrection, which we too have to experience. What is it that Jesus desires from us? Jesus desired to have a meal with Lazarus, and to have communion with him who passed through the darkness of death and then was called back to life by the words of the Lord.

When we read the Bible and learn about the people who served Jesus, or when we look at the history of churches and learn about people who were used by the Lord, we see that, as a result of their single-minded love and their sincere devotion to the Lord, these

people experienced the suffering of death, but were later restored through the power of resurrection.

I would like to take a quick look at Lazarus, the brother in this family.

It is clearly written that Lazarus was beloved by Jesus. The 11th chapter of John, which is devoted to the story of Lazarus, begins with this sentence: "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus". Why did Jesus allow Lazarus to become ill? Lazarus loved Jesus with all of his heart, and Jesus loved him too. So why did Lazarus have to get the deadly illness?

Let's try to imagine what happened to Lazarus. He was struck down by a serious illness, and he was losing strength every day. But Jesus didn't come to him, regardless of their prayers. "If Jesus were here, everything would be fine," they must have thought. But is it right to think that no problems will occur at all if Jesus is here? Of course—Lazarus would have been just fine if the Lord had been there.

His illness would have been healed instantly. But this was not what the Lord wanted. There was a reason why Jesus did not come to see Lazarus immediately, even though in His heart Jesus was crying out of pity for the three siblings. Jesus desperately wanted to save the life of Lazarus, but He knew that this was not the intention of His Father God. That was why Jesus did not come to see Lazarus before he died.

Lazarus needed to go through death to experience Jesus' power of resurrection. I guess that Jesus still uses similar ways to lead us in our lives of faith. Love for the self is formidable and it cannot coexist with love for Jesus.

If you have a desire for your name to be known, this will get in the way of true devotion for Jesus. Not until your thoughts and plans are delivered to death with eagerness, will you ever obtain the power of resurrection. Many unexpected things happen in our lives of faith.

We often wonder why these things have to happen. Yet somehow, we use our faith to overcome our pains. We attempt to cover up our anxieties and proceed into the unknown future, but this often ends in some unexpected tragedy. Even though we move forward, entrusting everything to the Lord, very often this doesn't seem to change anything.

When you live by faith, you may be devastated by something. You may then find a faint ray of hope from the depths of your despair, cling to it and somehow try

to move up—but you are totally overwhelmed and lose all your hope. Sometimes you are driven to despair and think that you are hopeless. Death is your only hope, and your grave is waiting for you. It is not until the Lord has led you to this point where you have lost all hope that Jesus steps forward and holds you tight in His arms.

Why does it have to be this way? It is because Jesus wants to reveal His power of resurrection through us. This is not based on any theory, human thoughts or specific teaching—it is the intention of the Lord. Our life has to be a testimony of Jesus. It has to testify of the power of resurrection.

The Lord's intention is to give us life, not death. Still, we should take note of the fact that this life can only be given through death. According to John, chapter 12, verse 2 which we just read today: "There they gave a dinner for the Lord Jesus and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him."

To conclude, let's think about the strength of what Bethany testifies to. There is no description in the Bible that Lazarus testified of his experience or even said anything about it after he was resurrected. Lazarus was not a preacher, after all.

However, we can find the amazing testimony of Lazarus between verses 9 and 11 of John chapter 12. Lazarus did not seem to testify by words. Instead, he testified with his life, which was newly resurrected. What does it mean to live with the power of resurrection? "Lord, I am not capable of the things that you commanded me to do. I am so useless to you. I cannot do this service without your help. Please lead me and give me the strength." This is living by accepting your powerlessness.

That is to say, total dependence on the Lord leads us to a life based upon the power of resurrection. We need to avoid depending on our innate ability and human knowledge. It is written that many people were saved through Lazarus' testimony and became believers.

But that was not the end of the story. When Lazarus testified, the devil began attacking him using religious leaders and trying to destroy him. Nothing offends the devil more than the power of resurrection. Do we have close fellowship with the Lord, as Lazarus did?

To have fellowship with the Lord and to become one with Him, we will have to go through suffering. We actually have to go through death. We will suffer from misunderstanding. There may be persecution. Does

this make us choose the easier way of living? We are now living in the end times. Jesus will come soon. Wherever we go, this world is filled with darkness and chaos.

However, if we understand what the Lord wants of us, we can get on with our lives of faith filled with great joy. What is important for us now is not knowledge or teaching, but to understand the intention of the Lord Jesus Himself. Jesus brought His disciples to Bethany. It was a place that was filled with undivided love for the Lord—a place where people served the Lord sincerely and Jesus's power of resurrection was manifested.

The Lord is still looking for Bethany. Don't we all want to love Jesus with deep, pure and undivided love, devote our hearts in order for the intention of the Lord to be satisfied, and, as those who experienced the resurrection after passing through the darkness of death and grave, become witnesses to His power of resurrection?

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