

LESSONS ON OVERCOMING FROM THE STORY OF LAZARUS

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INTRODUCTION

I have heard a number of great sermons on the story of the raising of Lazarus (whose name means God has given help) and I will make reference to them today as well as covering some different areas of teaching and the questions raised when we consider how we are to become **OVERCOMERS** and become effective such that we are comfortable to live our lives for all to see and question.

The title Rob gave me for today was ***Our mission in the marketplace*** and I want to use this story as a backdrop to help us see that in order to be relevant and effective we first must take steps to let God clean us up empower us for the work of His service.

Paul spoke last week about the need to be filled with the Spirit in order to be sensitive to the promptings of God.

We don't have time today to read the entire story and delve deeply into each aspect of people's response but let me give you an overview of what some of the issues are.

The issues surrounding this story are:-

- **UNBELIEF**
- **FEAR OF DEATH**
- **DISAPPOINTMENT**
- **OPPOSITION**
- **PAST LIFE**
- **JEALOUSY/RIVALRY.**

CONTEXTUAL OBSERVATIONS

Let's read from John chapter 11 between verses 17 – 40.

You will be very familiar with this story – just like the Sermon on the Mount or your favourite parable this too ranks highly in peoples remembrances. It is a story that exposes the good and not so good features of two sisters; it is a story that carries great challenges and vital learning for His twelve disciples; it is a story that was life transforming for the central character Lazarus (who we never hear from) and it's a story that shocked the crowds on that day. Not surprising then that it's a story that has great significance for us here now.

In these central characters, we see

- **Disappointment and Unbelief** from Mary and Martha
- **Unbelief** from the disciples
- **Opposition and Hostility** from the crowds
- **Jealousy and Rivalry** from the sisters
- **Fear** from almost everyone
- **Honesty (in dealing with past)** by Mary
- **Total Calm and Command** from Jesus

And we are going to look at all of these aspects and hopefully learn something from each that will help us in our own fight against those issues that still plague us and perhaps keep us from following Jesus more earnestly.

WHAT IS OVERCOMING?

Overcoming, or getting a sustained victory in our spiritual lives, is a state of being or on-going continuous improved experience which God wants us to reach. The letters to the churches in Revelation assure them and us that we face a struggle but if we persist and fight, there is an opportunity for our situation to change. It's possible for all God's people to be overcomers.

Do you believe this or do you give the words of Jesus lip service only?

I want to help us all to understand that sometimes we can't just go to this blissful state of **Overcoming** or **Victory** straight away there are a few steps along the route.

The stage before OVERCOMING is **ACCEPTANCE**

The stage before ACCEPTANCE is **DENIAL**

The stage before DENIAL is **HARDHEARTEDNESS or UNBELIEF**

The stage before UNBELIEF is **ENMITY with God**

Of the issues you and I are struggling with at the moment, where are you on this journey? And it is a journey – sometimes our progress is not instantaneous – it has to be hard won. It may involve some tears along the way.

BUT it is worth it when we get to that place when we know we have beaten our foe – conquered our demons – gained an inner strength and resolve to live that part of our lives differently.

A Christian practitioner who runs a programme to help people with deep, harmful lifestyle issues told me that in his experience, many people join the course with a certain problem or an adverse habit they are trying to **OVERCOME**. However, it is often another underlying issue or root problem that is masked by the outward manifestation which gets revealed by the Holy Spirit some way into the course and this has to be dealt with first in order that the person gains the strength and confidence to be an **OVERCOMER**.

GOD GIVES ASSURANCE.

Thank God that when we set out on the road to tackling and challenging our difficulties we don't face these issues on our own or more importantly in our own strength.

God is on our side and in Him we can have complete confidence that He knows what He is doing and also, He knows how to do it.

If you rely on me or anyone else to help you become an **OVERCOMER**, we might be able to inspire you or give you a good motivational talk, but at the end of the day, we won't be able to deliver the result you want.

We can be **part of the process, but not the solution** – and these are two very different factors.

So it is God and He alone who gives us the **ASSURANCES** that we will succeed if we submit to His help and intervention. And this is an important step which we need to recognize because if we fight this battle in our own strength we will have limited and short term success – but God is looking to change us not for the moment but for the lifetime.

WHAT THIS STORY TEACHES US

UNBELIEF

UNBELIEF is not the same as lacking faith or having no faith. It's a little bit more serious than that.

The word UNBELIEF has an edge to it – it implies resistance – it means there's a certain defiance in our attitude.

A friend, Lyn described it much better than I can. She said **“We think DOUBT is fine, but don't label us with being unbelieving. Unbelief isn't an intellectual refusal or doubt – it's OBJECTION! Unbelief hardens our heart.”**

She went on to say, **“What are we looking for, the writing on the wall, and a sign from heaven? No it can come in a still small voice. God is like a SATNAV, there isn't a full roadmap, there are choices to be made as you make your journey”**

So in our story here, Jesus is criticizing Mary, Martha and the Disciples for their UNBELIEF. Notice that He didn't criticize them for their lack of faith. We read in other gospel stories that Jesus is exasperated sometimes and says, **“O ye of little faith”**. This just means undeveloped faith – this is different to UNBELIEF – little faith He can deal with, but UNBELIEF will stop us getting the benefit and restrict our ability to be an OVERCOMER. So is there an issue where you are hardnosed and unbelieving – not willing to bend to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit?

In the story Lazarus was made alive but his bandages held him back.

“Unbind him and let him go” said Jesus (v 44)

What do you need to be set free from? Is it poor past experiences – some of your own making and perhaps some which have been imposed upon you?

God can help you deal with these issues – all you have to do is give Him a chance – yield.

FEAR OF DEATH

Jonathan Conrathe said about this story, **“They all had faith that Jesus could heal them but not that He could raise them from the dead”** He went on to say that **“Miracles are not a measure of timing but of connectedness”**

There is a high probability that we are all going to die at some point in time. That's not made to scare you – it's just reality.

Lyn said, **“Fear is the shadow of the possibility that something will come upon us”**

Fear holds us back. Fear stifles us. Fear can control and restrict us.

But, **“God's not given us a spirit of fear, but love, power and a sound mind”**

And in this issue of death, we need to use our sound mind and judgement.

Who holds the keys of death and hell? It's Jesus

Who has power over the grave? It's Jesus

Who has experienced death for all men but has risen from its clutches? It's Jesus

So we as Christians are not to fear death. We can have such an assurance and confidence that whilst we also will experience death this is not the end – heaven awaits – Jesus has gone before us to prepare a place for us so that we will forever be in His presence.

“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies”

This world is not a conclusion, a sequel lies beyond.

DISAPPOINTMENT

Mary and Martha both said to Jesus, separately, **“If only you had been here this would not have happened”**

Bad “stuff” is going to happen in our lives and we may as well realize it so that we don’t crumple and give in.

We live in a fallen and corrupt world where the devil acts as a usurper – he has temporarily seized power and his influence controls many lives.

We struggle to explain to the world why God allows suffering when the world won’t recognize or comprehend that dark spiritual powers exist in direct opposition to God and His people.

But the devils reign is brief, his power is limited, his future downfall is predicted.

We live in this world and are influenced by it, but our citizenship is vested in heaven. We are reminded to keep “looking up” to where our help and destiny lay.

None of us is immune from **DISAPPOINTMENT**.

We sing, **“Every blessing you pour out I’ll turn back to praise. Though the darkness closes in Lord, still I will say, Blessed be the name of the Lord....”**

Do we mean this or are these just hollow words, well meaning sentiments?

If we had time today to for everyone to share their hard life experiences today, it would take hours if not days.

Do I look around and see a church that is failing; a church that is about to give up; a church with nothing to offer others in their pain and loss?

No. I see Jesus written in your hearts and in your lives.

I see hope. I see contentment. I see peace. I see faith. I see inspiration. I see joy. I see life **overcoming** set backs.

Mary and Martha, the Disciples, the crowds eventually get a very big surprise. Lazarus is raised from the dead. A phenomenal Messianic miracle takes place. (the Rabbis had decreed that the Messiah (and only He) would be able to carry out four unique miracles – one being that a person would be raised from the dead after three days. The Jews believed that a person’s spirit and soul hovered close to the body for three days after which it went either to Sheol or Paradise. So Jesus tarries until the fourth day before he comes to reveal His Messiahship to the Scribes and Pharisees)

“This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it”

God has a habit of turning **DISAPPOINTMENT** into success. Will you allow Him to exchange your **DISAPPOINTMENT** into an opportunity for the glory of God to be made known?

I had thought about calling this talk, **“Coping With”**. Now there is nothing wrong in recognizing that there are some issues that we first have to “cope with” before we can move forward to a position of **“overcoming”**. But I rejected that thought with the firm intention of setting the truth plainly that God expects all of us to grow and improve in our Christian walk with Him.

“Coping with” is a stage along the way to maturity.

Your parents didn't expect you to stay as babies wholly dependent on them for the rest of your lives. Neither does God expect you to be spiritual babies all of your lives. He doesn't want you to be trapped in a permanent state of weakness and at times self-obsessed as you come to terms with your life application. I don't want to sound hard and unloving but honestly, some people (me included) are prone to settle at a level of fulfilment and attainment when God wants us to push through into a state of change in our lives which is both recognizable to others and permanent in execution. God wouldn't want it any other way. He wants to show to others through your lives that He and He alone, has brought about change and victory when it is clear that you, having tried to improve in your own strength, were totally unable to succeed.

OPPOSITION

Jesus faced terrific opposition from the ruling religious leaders of the day who were keen to protect their privileged positions in society and their standing with the Roman conquerors. When Jesus died, do you think that the Judeo-Christian faith which came into being was free from any opposition?

Well I think you know the answer to this! Thousands suffered inhumane and unbelievable deaths at the hands of deranged and cruel Roman Emperors'

And do you think that we, as Christians, 2000 years later are free from any opposition?

No we are very definitely not! Just look and read about the Persecuted Church.

The Jewish nation continues to suffer incredible hardship and blatant attack. The devil is out to exterminate them as a race. The devil has always sought to kill them off. Why? Because he knows scripture and the prophetic unfolding of God. It was foretold that the Messiah was to be born in the kingdom of Israel. He failed in that attempt to wipe out all male children under the age of two. And he will fail in his attempt to obliterate the nation of Israel in the End Times because it is to them that Jesus will return first.

So brace yourselves and be mindful of the daily situation we will find ourselves in. We are in the midst of a spiritual battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Will opposition come our way? I am afraid so. Can we limit its effect? Yes we can.

We succumb to opposition when we are not discerning of the origin of attack or are ill-prepared to defend ourselves and others around us.

But God has equipped us to fight and make a stand for Him. I love that line in Ephesians Chapter 6 at the end of the passage when Paul is using the everyday imagery of the Roman soldiers armour. It says **“having done all, stand”**

We all of us need to have an active prayer and praise strategy in place for when opposition comes. There are numerous promises in the bible which God has given us which we need to appropriate in times of difficulty.

One of the ones I use is found in John chapter 16 *“Whatsoever things you bind on earth will (have already) be bound in heaven and whatsoever things you loose on earth will (have already) been loosed in heaven”*

I am so grateful to God that He has placed us in a body (His church) and a family where we can look out for and aid those who are suffering. When you are down, hopefully someone will pick you up. And if you do this, when hardship comes upon you, those around you will reach out and lift you up and stand with you until the storm of life passes over.

If you have been opposed unfairly in your work, home or family situation and it still hurts, the only way you can take away the power of that experience is to firstly to realize that you are not alone in your experience – we’ve all been through it – and secondly, to realize that God is not mocked, He has a memory and He has a commitment to set right a wrong. He is a God of grace and mercy – but He is a God of justice too and He will not see His children dispossessed from the full benefit of their inheritance in Christ. Wait for His timing.

Romans chapter 8 v 28 -31 tells us that *“All things work together for good for those who love God, who area called according to His purposes.those He also called, He justified..... If God is for us, who can be against us?”*

JEALOUSY and RIVALRY

Much has been written in speculation about the relationship between Mary and Martha. We can read a number of passages about their behaviour in the gospels of John and Luke. What I believe comes across is a tale of two sisters who have different priorities and the one who is more constrained with care and dedication to duty (that’s Martha) is undoubtedly envious of her sister Mary who recognizes the importance of the moment (The Messiah is with them in their own home!) and her priority is naturally focussed solely on Him. Who amongst us can blame her?

Jesus said to Martha, when she complained to the Lord about her sister’s lack of attention to duty, *“Martha, Martha you are worried and upset about many things, but only one is important. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her”*. Would Mary’s priority be ours too I wonder, or would we be distracted and miss the moment?

It was unusual in the Jewish first century for a man who was unrelated to the family, to be talking to a single woman or a married woman. But Jesus is a glorious radical who debunks custom and fake religion and turns every situation into a good a positive experience. Women are comfortable in His presence and there is definitely evidence here that women became disciples of Jesus the Rabbi which was very unusual for the custom of the day. Women did not sit at the feet of the Master that was reserved for men only.

There is no place in the Body of Christ for jealousy and rivalry. No one is higher than another – all are equal – in fact Jesus takes the radical stance again by saying that *“the first shall be last and the last shall be first”*. If Jesus was to join us at the end of our meeting today when we are mingling and drinking coffee, who do you think He would go to first? Well I think He would go to the quiet and unassuming ones and then I think He would spend time with the kids and ask them what they learned in Sunday school and then when He had spent time with all those who are the least vocal and the quietest in nature then He would come to the leaders, the musicians and those with any office in the church.

There is no place for petty squabbles or any preening connected with your ministry in the Kingdom of God. “Ministry” is an overworked and misunderstood concept.

“Ministry” means to serve – not to gloat – and definitely not to boast. Paul said “Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who though in the form of God humbled Himself...”

There is only one way to gain victory and overcoming if we have been consumed with jealousy, rivalry and resentment over another Christian’s lot in life. We need to repent, seek forgiveness (from God and that person) and then to humble ourselves. The bible tells us to *“prefer one another in love...”* That means being honest with yourself, being realistic with the task God has appointed and equipped you to do and then stepping to one side to let others have their moment.

In James we read, *“Confess your sins to one another that you may be healed”*.

There is power in true confession. Confession strips control from the things which overwhelm us and rob us of our peace. There is victory and great overcoming to be had in simple confession to a confidential caring listener.

I feel sorry for Martha in this story. She learned an important truth with God but in a very hard way. God keep us from making the same mistake.

DEALING WITH THE PAST

The Mary in this story who anointed the feet of Jesus with expensive perfume is not to be confused with another Mary (probably Mary Magdalene) who anointed Jesus with oil (perfume) too.

Some teaching in early church history stated that they were one and the same and that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. I don’t see this from scripture but I suppose we will have to wait until we get to heaven to have all revealed! By that stage it will be unimportant – we will be too busy celebrating!

Mary of Bethany was probably from a wealthy Jewish family – not everyone had their own family tomb. And look at the large number of people which came from Jerusalem to mourn the death of Lazarus.

I think the lesson which stands out for me in this story is that Mary made a response to God. We don’t know how colourful or sinful her past may have been but we can reason with confidence that meeting with Jesus and spending time in His presence showed her what sort of a person she was and what sort of a person she needed to become.

It’s no different for us too. We all of us have a past. Some will be colourful and reckless – others will be reasonably restrained and unprovocative. But lives lived outside of Christ render us sinners and there is no partiality shown by God in the way he treats sin.

In Romans we read, *“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”*

The act of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus with precious perfume and then wiping His feet with her hair shows us many things.

- It shows resignation
- It shows trust
- It shows public humility
- It shows adoration
- It shows submission
- It shows following

Have we reached that point in our walk with God where we have consigned all the negative parts of our past life to history? On the cross, Jesus dealt with the issues that controlled us before we met Him. Our problem often is that we cling to the past; live in history; wallow in

the poor experiences that hurt us; and we allow ourselves to be drawn into the negative spiral of guilt and despair that once controlled us.

“But thanks be to God who always gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”

Are you going to be a Mary or a Martha this morning? Martha was consumed with the cares and worries surrounding her. Mary read the situation better. She saw the Lord of Glory standing before her and in being captivated by Him; she was liberated and found her path to total release and full overcoming.

Which way will you choose?

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