

## INTRODUCTION

In the commercial world marketing is a matter of art. People use various tricks to lure customers. A few days ago a sister shared on WeChat a life-lesson her daughter learned. This young lady received a scratch-off ticket in the mail. It promised that if the numbers on the ticket matched with the official numbers then there would be great prizes. With much anticipation she scratched off the concealed areas. Lo and behold, she won \$ 2,500! Or did she really? She called mom immediately to convey the great news. On they went to drive almost an hour to collect the prize. It was a car dealership. The manager patiently explained that the “lucky” girl did win the money. But the prize would be applied to any new car of her choice. By then she understood what she actually won. She had to pay ten times more to buy a new car in order to claim her prize. The man at the car shop showed his generosity by giving the family a real \$ 25 store gift card. That at least made up for the gas. That is how our world operates – you expect a lot but you end up getting not much. Not so with our Lord! He gives us blessings beyond our imagination. In John 11 Jesus yet again amazed His audience. The main characters in the story are three siblings – Martha, Mary and Lazarus. When Lazarus was very ill his sisters sent someone to ask Jesus for help. The message was brief: “Lord, the one You love is sick.” Isn’t that description beautiful? There was no need to mention any name or elaborate the request. God knows every child of His, and He understands our needs. We can simply pray: “Lord, the one You love needs Your help now.” Jesus delayed for two days on purpose before going to see the patient. By the time Jesus got there Lazarus was already dead. Jesus performed a miracle to raise Lazarus from the dead. How did the incident impact the people who witnessed the healing? What can we learn from this story? We shall see examples of three kinds of faith. I call them past, present and future faith. Through the healing Jesus shows us that He is God. He has the power to overcome death and sin.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. Faith that Laments about the Past 惋惜過去的信心

People with past faith lament over a lost opportunity. Let us look at the signs of past faith in some of the characters. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming she went out to meet Him. Hear how she talked to Jesus in **verse 21**: “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Was Martha blaming Jesus? Perhaps. Another possibility is that she reasoned if Jesus had come earlier He might be able to heal Lazarus. Her sister, Mary, also showed past faith. When Mary saw Jesus she repeated the same comment in **verse 32**: When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Feeling hopeless, Mary was overcome by sorrow in **verse 33**: When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. Both descriptions of “deeply moved” and “troubled” carry a similar meaning of showing anger. But what was Jesus angry about? There may be at least two possibilities. First, Jesus was angry because death brought pain to the people He loved. Second, Jesus was frustrated that people only had past faith in Him. Then we come to the shortest verse in the whole Bible in **verse 35**: Jesus wept. Jesus was not sobbing like

the sisters or the people who showed compassion. The word simply means that Jesus shed tears. The crowd thought that Jesus reacted with sympathy to the family. In fact, Jesus was agonizing about people's disbelief. To both sisters, since Lazarus had died it was too late for Jesus to do anything. Someone from the crowd also remarked in **verse 37**: ...“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” They referred to a miracle recorded in chapter 9 when Jesus healed a man born-blind. We studied that story a month ago. These spectators thought that Jesus might be able to cure Lazarus just like He restored the blind man. However, once a person's life was gone everything was over. When Jesus went to the tomb Martha also believed that it was too late. **Verse 39** reads: “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Martha wondered what Jesus planned to do with a dead man. In those times there was a teaching from the Jewish rabbis that a person's soul might be able to return to the body within three days after death. They thought it would be too late beyond that point. The fact is that by then the body will start to decay. Martha, Mary and the crowd all showed past faith. People who live by past faith are paralyzed by the reality. In Luke chapter 8 we see examples of other people who displayed past faith. A person named Jairus urged Jesus to heal his dying daughter. On the way to the father's home a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years touched Jesus' garment, and she was healed as a result. Jairus' girl was dying but Jesus was in no hurry! Jesus stopped and had a conversation with the woman, assuring her that the disease was no more. Just then someone brought a bad news that Jairus' daughter was dead. How would you feel if you were this father? I would be very mad at the woman and even at Jesus. “Why didn't you just pull a number wait in line?” “Lord, this lady will not bleed to death. You got your priority wrong!” How did Jesus comfort this father? Jesus assured him: “Don't be afraid; just believe, and your daughter will be well.” When they reached Jairus' home Jesus told the people there that the girl was not dead but she was only asleep. The crowd ridiculed Jesus: “You must be kidding!” Eventually, Jesus brought the girl alive from dead. Both Jairus and the crowd thought the optimal timing was gone. They were wrong! People with past faith mourn over lost opportunities. They maintain: “If only I were younger.” “If only I chose another profession.” “If only I warned my child ahead of time.” While the observations are right the interpretation is limited. God has not written the conclusion just yet. We should not constrain God's work by our past faith. We need to trust that even when God seems to delay His actions He must have a reason behind it.

## 2. Faith that Longs for the Future 苦等將來的信心

People with past faith focus only on the reality, thinking that it is hopeless once the opportunity is gone. In this passage we can see another type of faith. I call it a future faith. After her brother was dead Martha had no choice but to long for the future. In **verse 23** Jesus told Martha that Lazarus would come back to life: Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Jesus intentionally made the timing of Lazarus' return vague. Martha thought Jesus was talking about the distant future. That was why she responded in the **next verse**: ...“I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” That understanding was based on an interpretation of some Old Testament passages by the Jewish religious teachers. They believed that the Messiah will be here when this world comes to an end. Then all the dead people will be resurrected. Martha had no doubt that her brother would rise, but it would not happen immediately. Resurrection of the dead is surely a beautiful promise that brings comfort to the loved ones of a deceased believer. It is

just like Paul encouraged us in **1 Thessalonians 4:13-14** – 13 Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. 14 We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. Paul consoled the Thessalonica Christians that when Jesus returns all the brothers and sisters who had passed away would rise. Therefore, a believer's death is just like falling asleep. The sorrow due to temporary separation will turn into joy in heaven. This future hope is based on God's promise. But future faith is an incomplete faith, since our eyes are only fixed on heaven. Such faith may even cause people to make silly decision. Some companies advertise services to take care of people's pets after the rapture. The Bible tells us that rapture will take place when Jesus returns. All the Christians will be taken to heaven. Some pet-lovers wonder what will happen to their dogs and cats after the owners are gone. Will their pets be starved to death? No worry! These pet rescuers guarantee to arrive within 24 hours after the rapture. They have large pet resorts. For bigger animals like horses they have contracts with ranches to take care of them too. There are customers who are willing to pay for such service. According to the Bible, animals should not be the biggest concern at the rapture. People who are left behind should worry about themselves, because these unbelievers will face God's judgment! Future faith gives us hope. But if one's faith is only on the future it may not help much in the daily struggles of this life. Many people, even Christians, misunderstand that eternal life is all about getting to heaven. Such incomplete picture may lead to passive idling. People may think that it is a finished business after securing an entrance pass to heaven. Hence, how we lead this life after receiving Christ has nothing to do with eternity. However, that is not what the Bible teaches us about salvation. We are not saved according to our good works, but we are saved so that we can rely on God's grace to do good works. Eternal life begins the moment you receive Christ. God forgives your sins and He gives you a new life. Going to heaven is a continuation, rather than a starting point, of your eternal life. Brothers and sisters: whether you receive Christ at the age of 8 or 80 God has a plan for you. He wants to reveal His glory through your life to the people around you. He wants you to share the good news to those who do not know Christ. We may still be doing the same daily routine after we accepted Christ. But the motivation is different now. The future hope of eternity should energize us to live every day for God's glory.

### 3. Faith that Lives out the Present 活出今天的信心

Past faith is limited and future faith is incomplete. What God wants us to live out is a present faith. It is the kind of faith that helps us walk with Jesus day by day. By bringing Lazarus back to life, Jesus showed us how to have such faith. In **verse 4** even before Jesus went to meet with Martha and Mary He told the disciples the purpose for His journey: ...“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.” But Jesus' disciples had zero idea about what their Master meant. Jesus repeated the same message to Martha in **verse 40**: ...“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” God's glory was manifested through the supernatural healing power of Jesus. The same truth applies to our lives too. God also reveals His glory through our life circumstances. You see, things do not just occur randomly. God has a plan for you and me, and He has His perfect timing too. Jesus explained to His disciples in **verse 15** why He waited till Lazarus' death before going to Bethany: “and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe...” Through the miracle Jesus wanted His disciples to believe in Him. When Jesus arrived at the tomb He prayed to the Heavenly Father in **verses 41-42**: 41 ...“Father, I thank you that you have heard

me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” Jesus hoped that the spectators would put their faith in Him too. What did Jesus want people to believe in? He pointed out an important truth to Martha in **verses 25-26**: 25 ...“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” Jesus shifted Martha’s focus from the future event of resurrection to Himself who is the resurrection and the life-giver. Jesus intended to help Martha to put her faith in Him. Only Jesus has the authority to resurrect people. Why? It is because only in Him can one obtain eternal life. Jesus stated this truth in **5:24** of the book: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” All those who put their faith in Jesus have eternal life, not WILL have eternal life. We know how the story ends. Jesus ordered Lazarus to come out from the tomb. Some people believed in Jesus because of what they saw. But others hardened their hearts and rejected Jesus. What was the message that Jesus taught us here? By bringing Lazarus back to life Jesus showed that He had the authority over death. What is the cause of death? Death is the consequence of sin. Since every person is a born-sinner everyone will eventually die. Great evangelist Billy Graham once said that the death rate of mankind has never changed. It stays at 100%! But Lazarus’ resurrection was only temporarily. Jesus had only extended Lazarus’ earthly life. Lazarus still died afterward. However, through Lazarus’ resurrection Jesus foretold about His own resurrection after He died on the cross. It also guarantees the resurrection of all the believers when Jesus returns in the future. If Jesus has the power to conquer death and sin what problems you have that He cannot overcome? Put your faith in Jesus. What is bothering you today? Is it financial difficulty? Inter-personal conflict? Anxiety about your future or your kids’ future? Bring it to the Lord, walk with Him and live out the present faith!

## CONCLUSION

Jesus is God. He has the power to overcome death and sin. For those who do not know Jesus before today is an opportunity to receive His salvation grace. Confess your sins to Him. By faith receive Him into your heart as your Savior. Commit your life to Jesus and make Him your Master. Obey Him and walk with Him the rest of your life. In closing let me share with you an interesting story. Dan Stoddard is playing college basketball in a small Canadian town. He is quite an exception to a normal college kid. Stoddard is a 6-foot-8 and 38 year-old metro bus driver. He once lamented over his past. He had played in his high school team. But later his grades slipped so much that he became ineligible to play. Stoddard enrolled in college afterward but he dropped out after one semester. Life went on after marriage and two kids. Things began to change this summer when he and some buddies played in an annual high school alumni game. One of the referees took notice of Stoddard’s talents. After the game he invited Stoddard to join his college team. He thought the coach was joking. After all, who wants a 386-pound old man to add to a bunch of youngsters? But the coach had faith in Stoddard. He shed 70 pounds by working out and controlling his diet. He registered for a full-time online degree program and he also made the team! Stoddard cannot run as fast as a 20 year-old kid, but he stands like a brick wall that is unmovable. He plans to complete his 4-year degree to become an accountant. This 38 year-old college freshman has changed his course in life because a coach saw a different person in him. Similarly, Jesus sees a different person in you. Don’t get stuck by the past, and don’t just dream about the future. Come to Jesus, rely on Him and live out a different life for today!