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HOW TO EMPTY SPIRITUAL SEPULCHRES.

A SERMON BY REV. HERRICK JOHNSON, D. D.

["Lazarus, come forth"]—John 11, 43.

Miracles have been called parables in action. Some writers maintain that in the boom of each great miracle of the New Testament lies a great spiritual truth; that over and above the evidential purpose of these divine interpositions there is a close design of instruction on some vital point pertaining to the Kingdom of God. In this record of the resurrection of Lazarus the allegorical interpreters have found a fruitful field, claiming that "the whole process of the sinner's restoration from the death of sin to a perfect spiritual life," is here shadowed forth. Without attempting to determine how far, if any extent at all, an allegorical interpretation of the miracle is justified, it will not be questioned by any that these mighty and divine deeds of Christ are often beautifully illustrative of spiritual truth. Thickly scattered through the Scriptures are figures of speech that make this unmistakable. How often spiritual states are represented under physical aspects and conditions. Sin is a leprosy—the sinner a leper. How natural, therefore, in the miracle of the healing of the leper, to trace the striking analogies between that and the spiritual healing by which a soul is raised from the leprosy of sin. Sin is a blindness, and the sinner is represented as groping in the darkness "feeling after God." How clear, therefore, it is in the use of the miracle of the healing of Bartimaeus or of the man born blind to note and emphasize the beautiful and effective correspondences between those restorations of physical sight and the operation of that power by which a blinded soul is led to see God. So in the Scripture, sin is death—the sinner is said to be "dead in trespasses and sins." Unquestionably, therefore, the miracle of the raising of Lazarus must furnish some marked points of resemblance to the miracle of the resurrection of a dead soul. Indeed, right in the bosom of the record of Lazarus' resurrection we find that the material fact is mirrored by Jesus, the occasion of expressing the profound corresponding spiritual truth, "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me though he be dead yet shall live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die."

With this clear warrant for our course, let us see how a sepulchre was emptied at Bethany. Possibly we may the better see thereby how our sepulchres of sin about us, where our loved ones lie spiritually dead, may be spoiled of their possessions. It is apparent, at the outset, that under this figure of death, we shall find nothing answering to the sinner's own agony in securing eternal life. That corpse in the tomb of Bethany will remain cold and stiff until the word of Christ shall again with new vitality. The dead can be raised, but the living can be raised no more. This miracle will give us nothing illustrative of the sinner's sense of need and penitent confession and cry for mercy. Vital as these are if a sinner is ever to be saved, let it be borne in mind it is under the fact and figure of death the sinner is raised, and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. And the dead can tell us no need and make no cry.

Remembering, therefore, that no single miracle or parable or teaching of God's word brings out all sides of any great truth, let us see what there is in this record of the raising of the dead Lazarus that finds a voice for our instruction and spiritual profit.

The incidents of the resurrection group themselves under three heads. I. The human antecedents. II. The divine quickening. III. The human consequent.

I. THE HUMAN ANTECEDENTS.

1. Prayer. Jesus was sought. "Lord, he whom thou lovest is sick." A message. A request. A prayer. Lazarus was sick. A request. A prayer. Lazarus was sick. A request. A prayer.

2. Faith. A second human antecedent in this miracle of resurrection. Jesus was sought. He was sought for. He was sought for. He was sought for.

3. Effort. This was a third human antecedent in this miracle of resurrection. Jesus was sought. He was sought for. He was sought for. He was sought for.

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their shafts of wit at the praying that he should do. But Martha and Mary prayed so. And Jesus read between and beneath the lines, and saw their faith and came!

But what a faith! grasping in pleading with Christ to raise the dead! "Believest thou this?" Christ asks of Martha standing by the tomb of her dead brother. His question is definite. It passes on beyond the material fact to the spiritual truth, for the resurrection of the body to the resurrection and eternal life of a dead soul. He has pointed out a specific thing faith is to take hold of: "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he be dead yet shall live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." His question is, "Believest thou this?" The specific thing is power. Christ is able. It is this faith is to grasp. Not simply that whatsoever Christ asks of God, God will give. But the deeper truth, that Christ himself is the resurrection. Almightiness is in the good right hand of him whom we summon to raise our dead. We are to believe when we send for him. Mark now how this point gets emphasis in this miracle of the raising of Lazarus. Remember, this is the miracle that links itself closest with spiritual resurrection. Embosomed in the record of it is Christ's great promise, "I am the resurrection." And hence this is the miracle in which his power stands out conspicuous. There are other resurrections. The daughter of Jairus comes back to life; but possibly that was a swoon. The son of the widow of Nain is made to rise from his bier, but that, too, may have been a swoon. The man who had been dead for four days—dead and buried. The case is to be signal. There shall be no hinge or loop to hang a doubt on. Next to Christ's own resurrection this is the miracle of power. "Take ye away the stone," says Martha, "for this time he is dead." The record is clear. It is an element in the record adding to the proof of power. Suppose it be true that corruption is already there fastened to that dead body. "Take away the stone." Back corruption must go. The Lord of life is at the tomb.

The case is extreme, and we may well add, purposely extreme, that Christ's power over death may be put to the utmost possible proof. And the point for faith is that there can be no case of a dead soul so bad, so dead in sin, so given over to corruption as to be beyond the reach of Christ's great power. We are to keep this old Saxon word. It is an element in the record adding to the proof of power. Suppose it be true that corruption is already there fastened to that dead body. "Take away the stone." Back corruption must go. The Lord of life is at the tomb.

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