

Challenge Accepted – John 11:17-27, 38-45

Pastor Colin Rieke ~ April 6, 2014

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶ and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “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.” ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “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.” ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.



Dear fellow redeemed sinners, bought with the blood of the lamb,

It's the end of an era, or at least the end of a TV show. Last Monday evening, *How I Met Your Mother* concluded a nine season run on CBS. It detailed the adventures and journeys of Ted Mosby as he sought to find the mother of his children. Along the way one of his best sidekicks is Barney Stinson, a ladies man who is always up for anything, no matter how foolish it may be. One of his popular lines throughout the show is “Challenge Accepted.” It doesn't matter if someone actually challenged him to do something – like run the New York City Marathon, or if someone didn't challenge him to do something, he accepted it as a challenge. The enjoyment was watching to see if Barney would actually accomplish his challenge. Sometimes he did, sometimes he didn't.

While Barney's challenges were oftentimes trivial challenges and it didn't matter much if he completed them or not, there was another challenge that did matter. That was a challenge that God set up. Way back in the Garden of Eden, God created the world in six 24-hour days, and he created Adam and Eve to live and take care of that world, that perfect world. The “challenge” – be perfect, don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And while they may have achieved success in that challenge for a little while, we all know, it was a challenge they ultimately failed – they did eat from that tree. And the ramifications of failing that challenge have reverberated through the generations that have followed

them. The consequence is death, and not just physical death, but a spiritual death (I'll explain a little bit more about that in a minute).

God's challenge still stands – **“Be perfect, as I the Lord your God am perfect.”** But one after another, generation after generation failed, and our generation is no different. We needed someone to complete this challenge for us. And yet, God did not want the sinner to remain lost in his helpless condition. And so God sent his Son Jesus to take up the challenge and complete it. And he was only able to complete this challenge because of the power he had as God the Son. We see the extent of his power when he was confronted with the death of his good friend Lazarus. Jesus said, **“CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.”** A challenge which is

1. Possible for Jesus
2. Possible through Jesus

(1)

Now at first, this story may seem a little out of place, maybe you're checking your watches and wondering where two weeks went, because it's not Easter yet and we're talking about Jesus raising someone from the dead. No, you didn't miss two weeks of your life, Jesus is still walking his journey to the cross. And at this particular moment, Jesus comes face to face with the enemy of us all – death. We need to go back to the story to understand a little bit better. You have Mary & Martha – two sisters whom we have heard about before, and now their brother Lazarus. Jesus knew and loved this family. He was so close to them that Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus when their brother was sick and they weren't sure if he was going to make it.

What would you do if you heard that a loved one was sick? Probably drop everything you are doing and rush to their side. But what did Jesus do? He stayed where he was for two more days before going to see Lazarus. To the untrained eye, it might seem like Jesus didn't care. But he had a reason for doing this – so God's Son might be glorified! Through this sickness, Jesus would be glorified.

So now when he reached Bethany he found his friend Lazarus was already dead. Martha, the sister who we usually think less of came out to deliver the news to Jesus, **“If you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”** Martha knew the power of Jesus' miracles, she had seen the healing, and she knew Jesus could have healed her brother. But she limited Jesus' power only to that which a doctor might be able to do. And so after death, she said, “I know God still has a plan even though my brother died” similar to how we might say, “God's still in control.”

Here we see Jesus say, **“CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.”** Now maybe we think the only challenge Jesus accepted was to raise Lazarus from the dead, but it was also to show Martha the truth. **“Your brother will rise again,”** Jesus said. Martha delivers a wonderful confession of faith when she says, **“I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”** It's a confession that is good for any Christian to confess. And yet, Jesus wanted her to know the power behind the resurrection she spoke of. He was right there before her. He said, **“I am the resurrection and the life, the one who believes in me will live, even though they die.”**

You see, an argument that I've heard against Christianity is that it's not relevant today. How does it help me with my life today? Martha gives a perfect example of how Christianity is relevant for today. Her brother has just died, she is sad, just like anyone would be after losing a loved one, and yet she does not blame God for her troubles, she does not ignorantly imagine her brother is in heaven because he is a nice guy, she trusts in Jesus, **"The Messiah, the Son of God who is to come into the world."** It was the Son of God who accepted the challenge to be perfect, and he was. While, **"the wages of sin is death, the gift of God is eternal life."** Perfection and death cannot coexist, it's like oil and water, they don't mix.

And so here you have a battle about to go down. Jesus is confronted with death, and what will happen? To us, who know the story, it's obvious. But to Martha and those around it wasn't so obvious. Even when Jesus walked to the tomb and asked for them to remove the stone, it was not obvious what was going to happen. They would have heard about Jesus raising a widow's son, raising the 12-year old girl back to life, but that was done so far away, it wasn't done right before their eyes. Surely a man didn't have the power over death. But this challenge of bringing death from life was possible for Jesus.

While it certainly was an amazing miracle to bring life from death, that wasn't the only life he brought from death. He brought spiritual life from spiritual death. A consequence of sin is spiritual dead. The Bible tells us in a number of places – **"you are dead in your sins,"** to Adam and Eve, **"on the day you eat that fruit you will die."** We are all still here sucking wind, so physical death isn't what Jesus means. He is talking about being dead spiritually. The moment Adam and Eve ate of that fruit they died spiritually, the moment you were conceived, you were spiritually dead, you were a spiritual stillborn. Yes, we have the ability to make choices and decisions about what to eat or what car to drive, but we can't make a decision for God, we are **dead in our sins**. We call this total depravity, or original sin. This made Jesus' challenge not only possible for him, but also necessary for us.

Take Lazarus for example. He was lying dead in his tomb. He couldn't make a decision to become alive again, and even if somehow his mind was functioning and he could think that, he wouldn't have the power to make it happen. The same will be true when we die, and the same is true in our state of spiritual death. We have no power to do what God wants, even believe in him. So how does this happen? It is only Jesus' words of power which rouse us from spiritual slumber into a living hope.

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So here you have Jesus walking with Martha and a small crowd of onlookers out to the local gravesite. Lazarus had been buried in a tomb, not unlike the one Jesus would soon occupy, and this tomb too had a stone rolled in front of it to prevent the desert wildlife from desecrating the body. It had been four days. This not only ensured Lazarus was in fact dead, but that his body would likely be decomposing. You can see why Martha was hesitant to have the stone rolled away. No amount of Fabreze air freshener would have been able to cover up the stench.

But Jesus had the stone rolled away anyway. Complete silence fell over the crowd. Then Jesus opened his mouth and raised his eyes to heaven and prayed a prayer. Then he spoke the most powerful words you would ever hear. **"Lazarus, get up!"** It is a voice of command. And from inside of the tomb you can hear a little rustling, some dirt and pebbles crunching. And lo and behold, Lazarus appeared, as alive as can be. You or I could not have done this. But here death must take orders from him in whom lives the fullness of the Deity. Death must give up its prey at his command.

The raising of Lazarus shows the power Jesus has over death, not only reversing the death of Lazarus, but reversing his own death, and thereby reversing the death we will one day die physically. But raising us from physical death would mean nothing if we were still spiritually dead. It was his perfect life and innocent death and miraculous resurrection which carried the day, our sins which separated us from God are completely paid for. It is his voice that calls to us, his voice that creates faith in our hearts. It is CHALLENGE ACCEPTED, a challenge which is possible through Jesus. He explained this well in the parable of the vine and the branches. He is the vine we are the branches. Apart from the vine we are dead and can do nothing, connected to the vine, we are alive and can bear fruit.

Without Jesus calling us from our spiritual graves, we would be just as useless as a dead Lazarus. And really, that's the alternative without him. Without Jesus we have no hope, we have no life, we have no reason to do anything in this world. But with Jesus, we are perfect in God's sight. We no longer have to worry about whether or not we'll get to heaven. We have God's sure word of promise. It is a word of promise which makes our lives different. When we don't have to worry about whether or not we'll get to heaven, we have so much more time to live. To live in a way which pleases God, because that which pleases God now pleases me.

Many, if not all of us have come into close contact with death – death of spouses and family members, death of friends. Just think if it was your loved one in that tomb and you were Martha. Jesus says, **“I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live even though they die.”** And then Jesus says, **“Come out!”** And your loved one comes out of the tomb. Imagine the joy which would well up inside of you. Now imagine if you were the one being raised from the dead, imagine what that would be like. This is not some fantasy, it is a reality for those in Christ. Jesus says we will rise just as he rose. To see the power Jesus holds over death is amazing. This power is real, and this power changes lives. Amen!