

THE WORD RESURRECTS

DEVOTIONAL READING: [John 11:20–27, 38–44](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [John 11:17–44](#)

JOHN 11:17–27, 38–44

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.”

KEY VERSES

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”—**John 11:25–26**

PARTNERS IN A NEW CREATION

Unit 2: The Word: The Agent of Creation

LESSONS 5–9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recount the sequence of events in the raising of Lazarus from the dead.
2. Explain how Jesus’ raising of Lazarus proves the truth of Jesus’ claim in **John 11:25**.
3. Contrast his or her life as now lived in confidence that Jesus is “the resurrection, and the life” with his or her prior life.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. The Point of No Return
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Faith at a Funeral (John 11:17–27)
 - A. Status (vv. 17–19)
 - B. Frustration (vv. 20–22)
Not What I Expected
 - C. Life (vv. 23–26)
The Final Mile
 - D. Belief (v. 27)
- II. Freed from the Grave (John 11:38–44)
 - A. Emotion, Cave, Stone (v. 38)
 - B. Request, Objection, Response (vv. 39–40)
 - C. Prayer, Belief, Command (vv. 41–44)

Conclusion

- A. Pleasant Surprises

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Bethany *Beth-uh-nee.*

Judea *Joo-dee-uh.*

Lazarus *Laz-uh-rus.*

Perea *Peh-ree-uh.*

Introduction

A. The Point of No Return

The phrase *the point of no return* originated in the early days of powered flight. Technically, it is that place on a flight path where the amount of fuel remaining makes it impossible to return to the airfield of takeoff. When we use that phrase in other contexts, we usually mean that we've reached a point where it is impractical or even impossible to turn back and start over.

Our Bible story today is about a person named Lazarus who seemingly had reached the ultimate point of no return: death. Death is the last stop for all our hopes and dreams in this world, the final and unavoidable end to every plan and purpose. As we've all been told, the only two things that are certain in this life are death and taxes. While we theoretically can avoid taxes, there's simply no coming back from the grave.

Or is there?

B. Lesson Context

This week's lesson finds Jesus back in Judea after having withdrawn to minister in Perea, on the eastern side of the Jordan River ([John 10:40](#)).

Often noted is the fact that there are seven famous "I am the [something]" sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of John. These are found in [John 6:35](#); [8:12](#); [10:7](#), [9](#); [10:11](#), [14](#); [11:25](#); [14:6](#); and [15:1](#), [5](#). Today's lesson concerns the fifth of those seven, uttered by Jesus' in the third year of his ministry as a preface to the raising of Lazarus.

I. Faith at a Funeral ([JOHN 11:17–27](#))

As today's text opens, Jesus was already aware of the death of Lazarus ([John 11:1–6, 14](#)).

A. Status (vv. 17–19)

17–18. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,

The *Lazarus* of this account appears in the Gospels only here and in the story that immediately follows in [John 12](#). The fact that Lazarus *had already been in the tomb for four days* is significant. Ancient Jews believed that the souls of the dead hovered near their bodies for three days, after which time they departed. Therefore, the Jews in this account likely assumed that Lazarus had passed the point of no return, with no hope of recovery. For reasons to be seen, Jesus had been in no hurry to travel to Bethany after hearing of Lazarus's illness ([John 11:6–7](#)).

Before moving on, we note that this particular *Bethany* is the one that is *less than two miles* distant from *Jerusalem*—1.72 miles to be more precise, based on converting the *King James Version's* “about fifteen furlongs.” John's note on distance thus serves to distinguish this particular town from the Bethany that is on the other side of the Jordan River (see [John 1:28](#)).

19. and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.

[John 11:1–2](#) also establishes Lazarus, *Martha*, and *Mary* to be siblings. The sisters are known from the famous story in [Luke 10:38–42](#). In another well-known episode, this Mary was the one who would later anoint Jesus' feet with expensive perfume ([Mark 14:3–9](#); [John 11:2](#); [12:1–8](#)). The presence of *many Jews* who *came* to mourn Lazarus's death indicates that the family was well established in the community. It appears that the entire village of Bethany, and perhaps also some residents of Jerusalem (compare [11:45–46](#)), had come to pay their respects.

What Do You Think?

What lessons have you learned from occasions when others tried to comfort you in a time of loss?

Digging Deeper

Which Scriptures support your conclusions?

B. Frustration (vv. 20–22)

20. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

This verse allows us a peek at the personality differences between *Mary* and *Martha*. As in

[Luke 10:38–42](#), Martha seems to have been the more assertive of the two. The fact that Martha met *Jesus* on the road, before he got to the house, allowed for a time of private discussion.

21. “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Martha’s words are a little difficult to interpret. Some see them as an accusation (as in, “Why weren’t you here to help?”). Others see them as a statement of faith (as in, “If you had been able to come, I know you could have helped”).

We note that the sisters had sent word to *Jesus* when Lazarus fell ill, but *Jesus* purposefully delayed his return by two days ([John 11:3–6](#)). Yet the fact that Lazarus had been dead for four days by this time ([11:17](#), above) means that he still would have been dead for two days even if *Jesus* had not delayed.

Of course, *Jesus* could have healed Lazarus from a distance (as in [Matthew 8:5–13](#)). But *Jesus* allowed Lazarus to die because *Jesus* was planning to raise him from the dead (see [John 11:4, 11](#)). Naturally, Martha did not know this. Thus as is so often the case, emotions can overwhelm us before God reveals his larger plan.

What Do You Think?

Without giving directive advice, how would you counsel a friend who is distressed that the Lord does not answer her prayers as quickly as she would like?

Digging Deeper

How would insights from [Job 2:13](#); [16:1–5](#); and [26:1–4](#) improve your counseling technique?

NOT WHAT I EXPECTED

I was leading a new church near New York City. At first we met in a rented facility, but we soon we found a building to purchase—a former funeral home that was for sale at a price our young congregation could afford. We mused about how God would bring new life to a place previously devoted to death. We dreamed about how our ministry would grow in this new location. But just days before we finalized the deal, another buyer made a better offer, and we lost the opportunity to buy the building.

Congregation members were disappointed, and I felt like a failure as a leader. We had invested a lot of effort into the failed purchase, and I wondered why God hadn’t answered our prayers. I asked, “Lord, if you love our church, why didn’t you help us get this building?”

Looking for solace, I met with an older, experienced church leader who had served in the area for many years. I expected him to comfort me, but instead he challenged me, saying, “A leader’s character shows in the way you handle adversity.” That counsel wasn’t what I

expected—but it was what I needed.

We persevered. Eventually, God led us to purchase a wonderful facility. This time it wasn't a funeral home; it was a church building. We bought it for half the asking price, and the church thrived there. What God had in mind wasn't what I expected. It was better. Will you trust him when you don't understand him?

—D. F.

22. “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

At first glance, this statement may look like a veiled request: “Jesus, you can still save Lazarus if you want to.” But [John 11:39](#) (below) indicates that Martha was not thinking along that line. Thus Martha's statement here should be taken as a general expression of confidence in Jesus rather than as a particular expectation regarding Lazarus. Martha still respected and believed in Jesus. Her faith during a time of loss is noteworthy.

What Do You Think?

Which of the psalms are good models for you of how to express faith during frustration?

Digging Deeper

How can you ensure that your frustration doesn't end up as seen in [Job 38:1–2; 40:1–5](#)?

C. Life (vv. 23–26)

23. Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

In the Gospel of John, *Jesus* often says things that are subject to more than one interpretation. The ambiguity may have been intentional on Jesus' part to test peoples' levels of faith and understanding (example: [John 3:3–4](#)). Jesus could take the discussion to a deeper level if the person latched onto the wrong meaning.

24. Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Some first-century Jews did not believe in *resurrection* ([Mark 12:18; Acts 23:8](#)). But many did believe that the righteous are to rise to eternal life *at the last day* ([Daniel 12:2](#)), and *Martha* was one who so believed. Thus Jesus' words “Your brother will rise again” of the previous verse was a comfort in that regard. But Martha's faith affirmation in the verse at hand reveals that she did not detect that Jesus had something else in mind.

25a. Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.

Here we see the fifth of Jesus' seven “I am the [something]” sayings in the Gospel of John (see the [Lesson Context](#)). *Jesus* was attempting to push Martha's understanding to a deeper level. Earlier he had affirmed himself to be the one who raises the dead ([John 5:25](#)). But Jesus not only had the ability to *perform* resurrections; he is *the resurrection*.

The phrase *and the life* adds even more. Whereas many may think of eternal life as something that begins after we leave this world, John’s Gospel insists that eternal life begins when a person is reborn spiritually. That being the case, Jesus told people that eternal life was immediately available through him ([John 5:24](#)).

THE FINAL MILE

While driving to work I noticed a semi emblazoned with the words *Final Mile*. Underneath those words was a slogan stressing that the customer’s last mile was the company’s top priority. In the transportation industry, “the last mile” refers to the final leg of the supply chain as products reach their intended destinations.

We encounter many bumps, potholes, and detours as we journey through life. The road takes many twists and turns. But in the end, death cannot confine a follower of Christ to the grave. The Lord will see to it that those who trust in him will arrive at their destination, making it home safely—for eternity. Our final mile is Jesus’ highest priority. Is it ours as well?

—D. F.

25b–26a. “The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

Jesus pressed harder. In the phrases *even though they die* and *will live*, he used the word *dead* in a literal, physical sense and the word *live* in a spiritual sense: even if a person died physically (as was the case with Lazarus), he or she would live forever spiritually, based on belief in Christ.

The phrases that follow state the same things in reverse: anyone who believes in Jesus while physically alive, as Lazarus had believed in him, *will never die* spiritually. In other words, the person of faith has an eternal hope that goes beyond the grave.

All this makes sense to us in hindsight. But for Martha, full of grief over her loss, the entire matter may have seemed hopelessly confusing. Perhaps she wondered why Jesus was waxing philosophical when what she really needed was a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to cry on. Little did she realize that Jesus would soon provide a source of comfort beyond her wildest dreams!

26b. “Do you believe this?”

This is not a question about Martha’s belief in resurrection. She had already affirmed belief in that. This is, rather, a question about her personal trust in Jesus. Her answer follows.

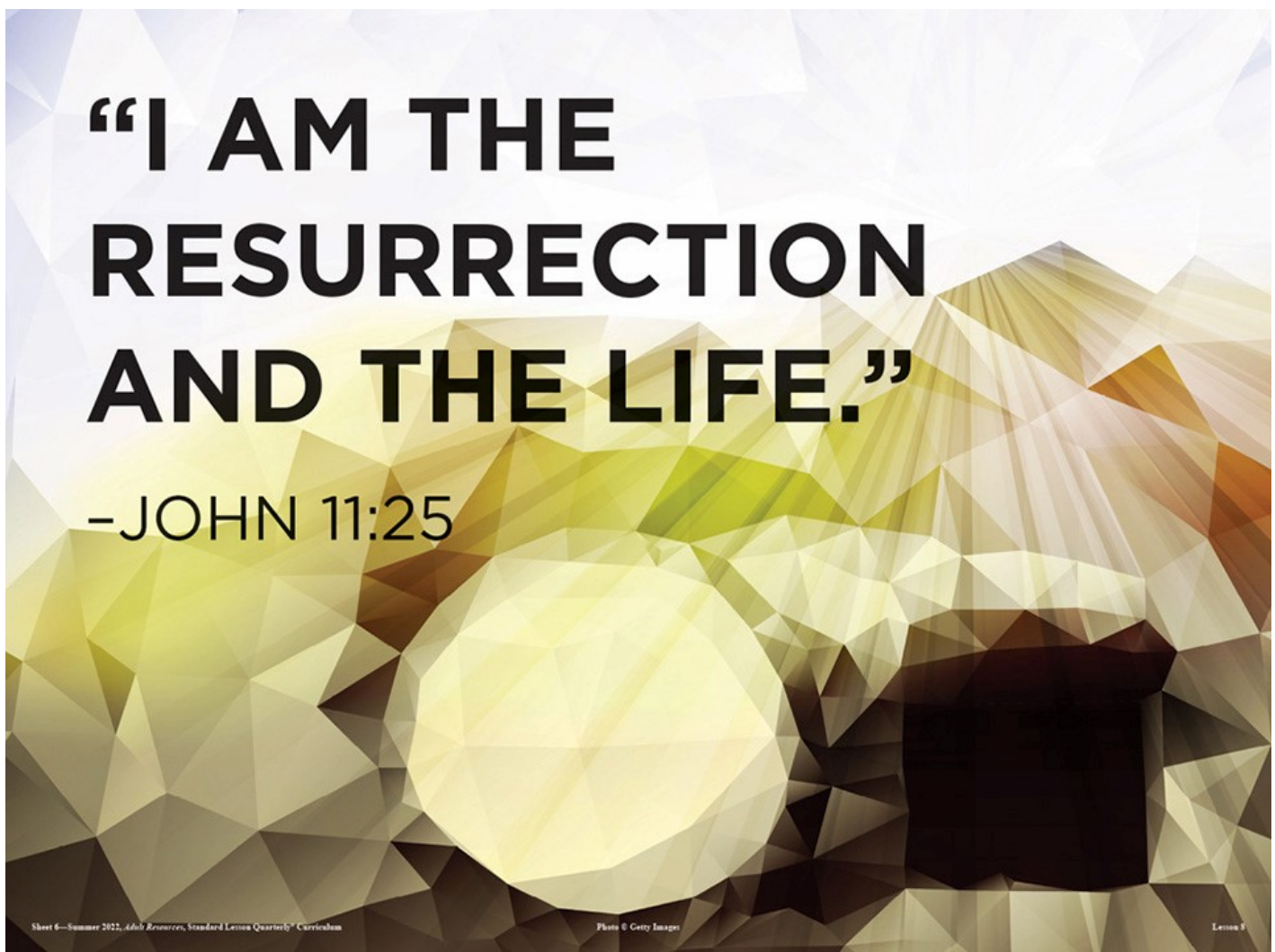
D. Belief (v. 27)

27. “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who

is to come into the world.”

The Gospel of John is filled with situations where people responded in varying ways to something that Jesus said or did. Sometimes the response was in faith, but sometimes the response was that of confusion or downright disbelief. These give us a chance to think about our own response to Jesus.

In this particular case, Martha serves as a model of faith in the face of loss. Despite her grief and confusion, she seems to have come closer to a genuine understanding of Christ’s identity than any other character in John’s story at any point before Jesus’ resurrection. [John 20:30–31](#) indicates that this Gospel was written to lead the reader to believe that “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God”; Martha’s words here closely echo John’s stated objective, although it seems doubtful that she fully understood all the implications of her own words.



Visual for [Lesson 8](#). Give learners one minute to reflect on a situation in which confessing Jesus would reinforce their faith.

As a faithful Jew of her day, Martha probably believed that *the Messiah* would come to

deliver Israel from political bondage (compare [Acts 1:6](#)). She may also have thought that the Christ would be *the Son of God* in the same sense that the great Jewish kings were sometimes called sons of God in the Old Testament (example: [2 Samuel 7:13–14](#)). The Jews as a whole were certainly not expecting a Messiah who would actually be God in the flesh ([John 1:11, 14](#))!

Some may find fault with Martha for not sorting through Jesus' intentionally ambiguous words to answer in a deeper way. But sometimes a simple affirmation of trust that Jesus is the promised Messiah is the best position to adopt in the face of grief and confusion. Whether or not we understand why a tragedy has happened, we can still turn to God with faith and trust, believing that he has everything under control.

What Do You Think?

What situations in your life are most in need of a faith response right now?

Digging Deeper

How do you decide when to rest in childlike faith vs. when to probe deeper for "answers"?

II. Freed from the Grave ([JOHN 11:38–44](#))

[John 11:28–37](#) (not in today's text) deals primarily with Jesus' interaction with Mary, sister of Martha. This interaction and certain comments by others who were present ([11:36–37](#)) set the stage for the resurrection of Lazarus.

A. Emotion, Cave, Stone (v. 38)

38. Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

Jesus was experiencing heavy emotions, described as being *deeply moved*. We should remember that even though Jesus was God, he was also a human ([John 1:14](#)). So he experienced human emotions.

The place of interment *was a cave* that was probably located in a stone outcropping on the lower eastern side of the Mount of Olives. Other family tombs were likely there as well, tombs that were caves—having been prepared to be suitable as underground rooms for the remains of the dead.

Such tombs were sealed with heavy stones, and the tomb of Lazarus was no exception. Ancient family tombs have been found having disk-like stones that are three or four feet in diameter. Such stones would often be on a track across the entrance.

However, the language here indicates *a stone* laid over the entrance. Not all tomb-caves

have upright entrances. Sometimes such caves descend vertically rather than extend back horizontally. This may be the case here. Artists sometimes portray Lazarus's subsequent exit from the tomb as coming up a stairway that has been chiseled out of the stony ground.

B. Request, Objection, Response (vv. 39–40)

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.”

To open a tomb is a serious matter. Such action can be construed as a desecration of the grave, so it must be ordered by a family member. That may be why *Martha* rather than Mary was the one to respond when Jesus told them to *take away the stone*. She seems to have been the older of the sisters, in charge of the family's business following the death of her brother.

Martha was not eager to agree to Jesus' request. *Four days* had passed since the death of Lazarus, and she assumed that his body was in its smelliest phase of decomposition. What we see are the limits of faith. Martha fully believed that Jesus could have healed Lazarus of his sickness and prevented his death ([John 11:21](#), above), as did her sister ([11:32](#)). But their faith could not imagine what was about to happen. For them, resurrection was a future event, a promised time when all of God's righteous people would be raised from the dead ([11:24](#)). Had the two sisters not heard of the raising of the widow's son at Nain ([Luke 7:11–17](#)) or that of Jairus's daughter ([8:40–56](#))?

40. Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

In response, *Jesus* reminded Martha of their earlier conversation. His challenge to her was that a person who believed in him would never die ([John 11:26](#)). Death is sad, but it is not the end for those who trust in Jesus. This was a crucial moment, for the tomb might not have been opened if Martha's faith faltered. Her faith was challenged by the trauma of being asked to have a beloved relative's grave disturbed—and the smell that would accompany it.

We are reminded of John's later conversation with the risen Christ, who declared himself to hold “the keys of death and Hades” ([Revelation 1:18](#)); he is capable of breaking the hold that death has over humanity. To believe in and understand Jesus' power over death is to be aware of *the glory of God*, and this glory was about to be revealed to Martha in the resurrection of her dead brother.

In the Old Testament, “the glory of the Lord” is synonymous with God's presence, something that was observed at Sinai ([Exodus 24:17](#)), at the tabernacle ([40:34](#)), and in the temple ([2 Chronicles 7:1](#)). God was present in the person of Jesus, and this was revealed earlier in glorious fashion at the transfiguration (see [Matthew 17:2](#); compare [2 Peter 1:16–17](#)). Although what has unfolded thus far in our text may seem little more than a humble human drama

witnessed by a few dozen people in an insignificant village, no one present there should doubt the power of the Lord after what would happen next.

C. Prayer, Belief, Command (vv. 41–44)

41–42. So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 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 uttered a prayer that revealed the ultimate purpose of the miracle that followed: *that they may believe you sent me*. While many of Jesus’ miracles demonstrated compassion, all are intended to point people to God through Christ. There can be no doubt about the source of Jesus’ power, as he directed all credit to the *Father* for what was about to happen.

What Do You Think?

In what ways should you change your prayers so that God is more likely to honor them?

Digging Deeper

To what extent will [James 4:3](#) apply to those needed changes?

43. When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

This verse is a graphic illustration of what John envisions happening at the end of time, when Christ will call all the faithful to him at his return. In [John 5:25–28](#), Jesus promised that a time is coming when the dead will hear the *voice* of the Son of God and be raised to eternal life. Lazarus’s resurrection (next verse) was thus a foreshadowing of what will happen to all who believe.

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.”

In ancient times, dead bodies were wrapped in strips of cloth with spices before burial to control the odor of decay. Many comparisons have been drawn between the *grave clothes* and *cloth* of Lazarus and Jesus ([John 20:6–7](#)). We can only wonder how the crowd reacted while watching Lazarus emerge from the tomb, wrapped in these items! The fact that *his hands and feet were wrapped* brings a comical image to mind: Lazarus, unable to remove the wrappings, perhaps was able only to hop as he emerged. Clearly, when Jesus calls, you come!

Conclusion

A. Pleasant Surprises

While it’s always nice to get what you’ve worked for, sometimes a pleasant surprise goes a

long way. Things we don't expect—like a bonus at work or a letter from an old friend—make us feel appreciated. Martha received the ultimate pleasant surprise as she saw something unfold that was humanly impossible.

Since Jesus really does have power over death, why should we fear anything? Since he secures our eternal destiny, can he not also provide everything else we need in this world now?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, help us to trust you more in the face of death. We pray in the name of the one who conquered death, Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The grave is not the end.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Create three slips of paper having the following prompts, one each:

- The saddest funeral I ever attended was ...
- The funeral I attended that had the best message of hope was ...
- What I want my funeral to include is ...

Give one slip of paper to each of three class members. Ask that the prompts be read aloud in turn, followed by your asking who in the class would tell a story indicated by the prompt.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “(Mis) conceptions About Death” exercise on the activity page, which you can download. Have participants work in pairs to complete as indicated. After five minutes, reconvene for whole-class sharing of insights regarding the stages of life. Do not discuss the compare/contrast with [1 Corinthians 15](#) at this point; save that for **Into the Word**.

After either of the above, lead into Bible study by saying, “Even though we may not want to think about it, death is a regular part of life. But that won't always be the case. Let's see

why.”

Into the Word

Distribute the following on handouts (you create) as a closed-Bible pretest. Assure participants that they will score their own results; you will not collect them.

1. Martha addressed Jesus with this word: .
2. Mary and Martha’s brother: .
3. The first sister to greet Jesus: .
4. Martha and Jesus agreed that her brother would do this: .
5. What Jesus promised Martha would see: .
6. Used as a grave: .
7. How Jesus addressed God: .
8. What Martha was commanded to do: .
9. The number of days Lazarus was in the tomb: .
10. Where the friends of Jesus lived: .

(Answers according to [John 11:1](#)–Lord [v. 21]; 2–Lazarus [vv. 19, 21, 43]; 3–Martha [v. 20]; 4–rise [vv. 23–24]; 5–glory [v. 40]; 6–cave [v. 38]; 7–Father [v. 41]; 8–believe [v. 40]; 9–four [vv. 17, 39]; 10–Bethany [v. 18].)

Option. Depending on the nature of your class, you may find it useful to convert the above from fill-in-blanks to a matching quiz. If you do, it’s best to provide more possible answers than there are questions so that correct answers cannot be arrived at by process of elimination.

After your class studies the lesson, surprise them by administering the same quiz again to see what has stuck with them. (*Option.* If you gave the quiz in matching format the first time, switch to fill-in-blanks this time.)

Option 1. If you used the alternative activity “(Mis) conceptions About Death” in the Into the Lesson segment, return to that exercise to compare and contrast the stages-of-life views of death with what Paul says in [1 Corinthians 15](#).

Option 2. If you desire to focus on the one who has conquered death, Jesus, distribute copies of the “Right Thoughts About Jesus” exercise from the activity page. Announce a speed drill to see how fast participants can finish the seven statements under the “What’s So” header (only). Call time after one minute in any case. Then move to whole-class discussion or small group consideration of the significance (“So What?”) for each “I am ...” statement. Skip number five, saving its consideration for the Into Life segment.

Into Life

Form participants into study pairs. Everyone has the same assignment: compare and contrast his or her life now in Jesus, who is “the resurrection, and the life,” with life before believing in him. (Explain that “compare” means how the two were the same; “contrast” means how the two were different.)