

## His Final Steps Led to a Tomb <sup>1</sup>

✝ A tomb emptied for us and our faith.

✝ A tomb emptied for God's plan to be finished.

In the name of Jesus, our devout and determined Savior, dear fellow followers of our Lord:

If somehow God gave you the option to know exactly what day and time you would die, the place, the way, would you want to know? I would not; I don't think my faith could handle that. If I knew I would suddenly die of a heart attack on a Tuesday at 1:30 pm, at 103 years old, might I become complacent, ignore my Bible, skip church, grow careless about my faith? Or if I knew I'd die of cancer in just a few years, wasting away, failed chemo, might I become so depressed that I couldn't be a blessing to my family and friends? I'm glad I don't have that information. I leave all things to God's direction.

What gives me confidence to trust God is the fact that Jesus did know absolutely all the details of when and how and where He would die. As true God, omniscient in His deity, Jesus knew every step of His life took Him closer to that cruel cross on the hill called Golgotha. Every twist, every turn, every plot of His enemies, every hateful word thrown at him, every lash of the whip, every tortured breath on that cruel cross – Jesus saw it all and felt it too, until He could shout, “It is finished!” Seeing horrific pain and agony, the most terrible human loss for any member of the human race, yet Jesus took **His Final Steps**, one day at a time, pressing forward as the only One who could save the human race. Love compelled Him. Tonight, we see the catalyst that got it all started in Jesus' mightiest miracle to date, setting the stage for God's gracious plan to be completed. From eternity He set the precise time, the exact place, and prophesied the way that the Lord planned it. Tonight, we see **His Final Steps Led to a Tomb – A tomb emptied for us and our faith, A tomb emptied for God's plan to be finished.**

✝ A tomb emptied for us and our faith.

Jesus knew exactly what He was getting into by going to Bethany, home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem, headquarters of Jesus' enemies. The chief priests, Pharisees, teachers of the law had been hunting for three years, maybe even praying for Jesus to make a mistake, a wrong word, a crabby answer after a long day with crowds pressing Him when He was exhausted – anything to discredit Him or convict Him of blasphemy – and sentence Him to death.

Yet there was no mistake, not a single wrong word spoken by the Word of God Incarnate. His enemies got so desperate they tried to take Jesus by force, but he *eluded their grasp* (10:39) and withdrew to a remote place back across the Jordan River, out of reach. Yet Jesus' time was approaching. His appointment with the cross was coming soon. So, when Mary and Martha sent word “*Lord, the one you love is sick,*” Jesus knew he had to go. (11:3) He said to his disciples, “*This sickness is not going to result in death but it's for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*” (11:4) Still He waited, puzzling His disciples, but John shares this insight: *Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary and Lazarus. Yet when he heard Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.* Then said, “*Let's go back to Judea.*” (11:5-7) Why wait two more days? “*So that the Son of God may be glorified.*” (11:4) Finally Jesus had to tell his disciples, “*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I'm going there to wake him up.*” “*Lord, if he's fallen asleep, he will get well.*” Patiently, calmly Jesus explained, “*Lazarus is dead. And I'm glad for your sake that I was not there, so that you may believe. Let's go to him.*”

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<sup>1</sup> Based on NPH Lenten Series 2023, by Glenn Schwanke: *His Final Steps*. (NPH 1-800-662-6022)

Why wait two more days? The problem is not with God; the problem is that we humans can only see things in contrast. In a sea of red roses, another red rose won't stand out. But a white rose you'll see. If your life is a bed of roses with no problems, you can't see God's grace in action. Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, both said, "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" They knew Jesus had the power to heal any sickness. But they also needed to see in contrast, Jesus' power over death itself. We all need to hear Jesus say, "**I am the resurrection and the life whoever believes in me will live even if he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never perish. Do you believe this?**" (John 11:25f) Jesus asks us at the graveside of loved ones, "**Do you believe...that I am the resurrection and the life?**"

Yes, Lord! We believe it! We're watching your **Final Steps** to **A tomb** that needed to be **emptied for us and our faith**. That tomb needed to be emptied to strengthen the faith of the grieving sisters. Lazarus needed to learn that all things work together for good. (Romans 8:28) The apostles would be commissioned to go to the ends of the earth as eyewitnesses that Jesus is Lord over life and death. They had to see the contrast between human powerlessness over that dreaded enemy death and the awesome, invincible power of Jesus to strengthen our faith: "**I am the resurrection and the life.**" We need to see the "four-day" dead man come out of his grave at Christ's command, "**Lazarus, come out!**" Then we can be confident that Jesus could come out of His grave alive after three days. We needed proof of Paul's triumphant shout: "**Death, where is your sting! Where, grave your victory?**" (1 Corinthians 15:55)

A former member, now in heaven, told me, "Pastor, I'm not afraid to die; it's the process that scares me. So, can we trust our Lord Jesus also with the process? **His Final Steps** show us..."

### ✝ **A tomb emptied for God's plan to be finished.**

In a world gone mad with antichristian forces, we need to see Jesus controlling the process of His own death, frustrating the plans of His enemies by choosing His own time, His own way, His own place, to be crucified in our place. His enemies had no power. They only prove God's awesome power to save.

The greatest miracle of Jesus' life – besides his own resurrection on Easter Sunday – was to raise Lazarus from the grave after four days. The Jewish *Talmud* says human souls hover around the body for three days after death, lost, confused, hoping, waiting, praying to be reunited with the body and life. But after three days the *Talmud* says the soul is taken to the Lord and resurrection can no longer happen. That's Jewish tradition. Can you see another reason why Jesus made sure four days passed before he raised Lazarus from the dead? He conquered all human tradition too! **God's Plan** had to be finished.

News of Lazarus spread like wildfire, exploding into the last stage of **God's Plan** of grace. John informs us (11:45-53) how irrational Jesus' enemies became. Seeing everyone following Jesus because He raised Lazarus from the dead, their solution was to kill Lazarus again. (John 12:10) Even though Jesus proved His power over death itself, they became all the more infuriated to arrest Jesus, convict and get rid of Him, whatever it took. By contrast their feeble efforts degenerate into insanity at the simple, powerful, loving way that Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave. Capturing Jesus, illegally trying the Lord of Creation during the night, then crucifying God's Son on Calvary's cross – all would only witness how sinful man really is, how desperately we humans need a Savior. All this would be finished according to **God's Plan** at the Passover, the place and time God set from all eternity to sacrifice His Lamb for you, for me, for all.

You and I don't know when, how, or where we'll take our last breath, but Jesus does. He knows all that in the infinite love of the omniscient God who wants to bring you safely home to heaven. He took **His Final Steps** so that our sins could be washed away with His holy precious blood, and we would not have to be afraid to die. But we don't have to fear the process either because God controls every process, even those of His enemies behind the scenes. In contrast with the weakness of His enemies, Jesus' invincible love and power says, "**Amen, Amen, I tell you: anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He is not going to come into judgment but has crossed over from death to life.**" (John 5:24) "Savior, I follow on, Guided by thee." (CW 473) Amen.