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## Why the Church Keeps Growing, Part 2

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### John 11:38-44 (ESV)

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

### Acts 15:4, 19:20

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

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The text says this: Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. The tomb was a cave with the stone laid across it in an entrance. And he simply said, "Take the stone away."

Now, these stones were not movable by one person. And so this was a little bit of a project to remove a stone in front of a cave. And so it would have taken some work for some gentlemen.

So Martha intercedes again. She's not sure this is a very wise idea, four days after Lazarus' passing. And so she says to Jesus—there she'd been walking with him to the tomb—she said, "But Lord, by this time there's a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

The Scripture tells us twice: he's in this tomb for four days. She's right, you know. I don't know if you've ever been around a dead carcass that's been there for four days, but it smells. It really does. I grew up on a farm, and I have smelled this before. She's right. There certainly had to be a bad odor in this tomb.

But Jesus, deeply moved in spirit, says to Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked up and said—now you have Jesus the Son praying to God the Father, as one God, communing with each other, talking in harmony with each other—Jesus says to God, “I knew that you always hear me. I'm not praying this for my benefit, but I'm praying this in front of these people so that they may believe that you sent me.”

John's gospel says time and time again: we are called to believe. Believe. Jesus came, and in believing we will have life in his name.

So they took away the stone. Jesus prayed. And after he was done praying, the Scripture says, he called out in a loud voice: “Lazarus, come out!”

And the dead man came out.

I have been meditating on this text for over a month—that Jesus, when he speaks, people are called out into life, and life to the full. I have been asking Jesus to call me out more into life, because I've come to believe that of all the voices in the world, there's really only one that matters. And that's the voice of God in our lives.

Everybody else was stumbling around wondering what to do—in despair, in darkness, in disbelief, and in death. But when Jesus spoke, everything changed. The atmosphere started to adjust. People's spirits started to lift. Hope started to come back in the room. Life started to come into the souls. Anticipation started to resonate in the hearts of people. People were being called out of darkness, out of disbelief, into the glorious light of the children of God.

The dead man came out.

Why keep doing church? Why keep gathering on a Sunday morning? Why keep opening the Word of God?

If you were to go to our website here at Nazareth, you would see that we believe something about the Bible. If you go to the tab of belief around the Bible, you would see that we believe that the Holy Bible is the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God. It's infallible, and it's authority over all matters of faith and life.

We also believe that God's Word is living and active. It's unfailingly powerful to accomplish God's will both now and forever. And God's Word is unchanging. It was the same a thousand years ago, 2000 years ago. It will never change. It will be the same a thousand years from now. And it has the power to create, transform, make, and bring new life to people.

And why is the church growing? Why is the church persevering? Why is the church thriving in different places in the world? Because the Word of God, inspired and empowered by the Spirit of God, continues to bring the people of God to life in the world. That's why we stay doing church.

The early church grew, Acts 15 tells us, because the disciples were teaching and preaching not their own opinion, not their own ideas, but the very Word of God. Acts 19 tells us: as the Word of God went forth, it continued to spread widely. And listen to this—it grew in its power. It grew in its power.

This is where the power comes from. The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit, and it divides the soul of human beings from their spirit so that they can be convicted of what's not of God and what is of God. And their spirit can begin to surge in the new life of Christ.

But all of this comes from the Bible. The truth comes from Jesus. But it's not just that it brings life. There's more to this story.

The text says the dead man came out, but his hands and feet were still wrapped with strips of linen, and there were still grave clothes around his face. He's alive, but he's not free. Another version says, “Out came the man who had been dead, his hands and feet tightly wrapped in burial clothes, with a burial cloth wrapped around his face.”

They mummified dead bodies back then. And those mummified bodies—sometimes the legs were wrapped together, sometimes they were wrapped separate. But they tried to wrap the whole body and anoint it with spices and oil so that it wouldn't decay so quickly. It was just sort of a dignified way of burying the bodies.

And Lazarus, when he comes out of the tomb, he's alive, but he's not free. And I just have to tell you that I feel alive in Christ. But if I were honest with you, I don't always feel totally free. I long for a better day. And I would suggest to you that all around this world, there are people who are spiritually dead, people who are spiritually alive, and then people on the journey at different levels of spiritual freedom in life.

And what we have here is we have an illustration of what salvation is like: when a person is called by God out of death into life, out of darkness into light, out of condemnation into the glorious freedom of the children of God. They're born again into the family of God through the word of Jesus, through the gospel of our God. And then they begin to grow in sanctification and purification and freedom in their spirits and souls before Almighty God.

And this is what God is inviting us into. And if we say we don't need this process and don't need to cooperate with him, the Bible says we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. For the Bible says all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And we confess it this way in our services almost every Sunday: we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

The dead man has come out, and he's alive, but he's still wrapped in the grave clothes.

We were sharing as a staff earlier this week, and one of our staff members used these words exactly. They said, “I know I'm saved. I know I'm right with God. I know I'm a child of God. But I just don't feel free. I don't feel free.”

But Jesus, when he was anointed at the beginning of his ministry, said, “I have come to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up broken hearts, and to set captives free.”

When I was three years old, my father and mother went to a crusade where they heard the gospel of our Lord, and they came to salvation in him. And then the Spirit opened their eyes to the enslavement of my dad's history and sin.

In his history, there is great rage in the men. There's great anger in the men. There's workaholicism in the men. They are described across the board as hard men. They were alcoholics to no end. All kinds of liquor bottles in the barns. They played poker every Friday night in the basement, and the women were only allowed to come down to bring them food.

In this darkness of enslavement to these sins came depression and anxiety, the likes of which my mind cannot even comprehend. And into this genealogy of enslavement to human sin and rebellion against God, the Holy Spirit came to my dad and awakened him in Jesus.

And he came home when I was three years old. He and his mother and I watched him the next Sunday morning go to the liquor cabinet above the refrigerator, take out all their hard liquor, and pour it down the drain, knowing that alcohol had enslaved my family. And they began on the journey out of sin and into the freedom of God.

Friends, why does the church need to keep going? Why does the church need to keep proclaiming the Word of God? Because, as James said, whoever looks into the Word of God, which is the law of liberty that sets people free, and they continue to look in it over the course of their life and hear what it says, and don't just hear it, but do it—

It says this: they will be set free by it. They'll lose the chains that enslave us in this world to help our spirits soar into peace and joy and hope, and all of these things that come to us from outside of this world into our hearts, and to begin to experience the glorious kingdom of heaven here on earth right now.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

When the church is weak, the powers of this world take over and we experience more and more evil. But when the church grows strong and people live under the reign of the Spirit of God and the truth of God's Word, evil dissipates, the light shines, and our world feels different.

And the church must be prepared as a glorious bride for Christ to return to. And when the church reigns—not in dominion over people, but reigns over evil and brings light—the whole world rejoices.

And so we have to keep sharing the Word. Jesus said not only, “Lazarus, come out,” but, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

Three reasons why I am so thankful that so many people have been faithful here at Nazareth and championed the church forward around the Word of God: because it is the power of the Word of God that is our hope, the power of the living Christ, the living Word that brings life to people and sets people free from enslavement—all kinds of enslavement in this world.

Three reasons why the church has to keep championing forward. There's not a single person in the world today who's not either spiritually dead in their sins and needs brought to life through Christ, or in the process of being brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. And it's the Word of God that guides us down this path.

Every person in the world is saved and brought into eternal freedom through God's Word, and in his kindness, his patience through his Word, through his people. God is still calling individuals out of darkness, out of enslavement to sin, into his presence.

And as God calls people on this narrow road—and make no mistake about it, the road to destruction is wide. Jesus said many people find it. The road to life is narrow, and only few find it. But as people decide to walk on this road, the only way to stay on the road requires us to hold closely to the Word of God, the community of faith—we can't do it alone—prayer, confession, repentance, and the power of God's Spirit.

It will only happen as the church is the church together.

Friends, I ask you to pray for the Cedar Falls Bible Conference this week as God's Word is taught out there. People come from different nations, all over the country, to come here. Different Bible teachers expound on different parts of this book that brings freedom.

I would ask you to pray that God would do his work using his Word to set more and more of his people free into the glorious freedom, and courage, and faith, and perseverance, and joy, and hope that God wants his people to know.

Let's pray together, shall we?

Father, we thank you for the opportunity to gather here this morning. We thank you for loving us the way you do. We thank you for your kindness and your patience and your mercy with our world.

When I read through your revelation of history and how we have rebelled against you so many times in so many different ways, and taken you less seriously than we should, I can only ask for your continued patience, your continued mercy.

I ask that you would stir in our hearts a love for you that transcends a love that we've known in the past, that you would deepen our conviction and our longing for you, so that we could be strengthened and encouraged and made more whole, and become brighter as your lights in the world.

Strengthen your church, Father, through the teaching of your Word and through our worship. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.