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Jesus Raises Lazarus

Scripture: John 11:1-44

Theme: Jesus has power over death

High School (Ages 15-18)

Free curriculum for small and rural churches

Lesson Overview

Lesson Overview: "Death's Shadow, Life's Promise" (John 11:1, 44 , The Resurrection of Lazarus) At its core, this passage challenges the hard-won truths of grief and mortality by revealing Jesus' transcendent power over death, not as a final, unassailable truth, but as a radical interruption of its dominion. For high school students grappling with existential questions about suffering, meaning, or their own mortality, Lazarus' raising offers a provocative lens: If God could undo death for one, what does that say about our future and our hope? Theologically, it underscores Christ's exultant victory (1 Cor 15:26) over the ultimate enemy, while real-world application invites students to consider how faith in resurrection shapes how they respond to loss, whether in their families, friendships, or even their own fears of impermanence. The lesson could pair Scripture with thought-provoking prompts like, "How does this story challenge or complicate your understanding of 'time's eternity'?" to spark deeper reflection. Encourage them to wrestle with the tension: Can faith in God's power over death reconcile with the inevitability of suffering? Optional reflection: children can draw a picture of Jesus helping their friends, then share one way they can help someone else this week. This extra activity supports the lesson's theme and gives teachers a simple, lowprep option for extending the discussion.

Bible Story

Title: "A Love That Transcends Death: Lazarus' Resurrection and the Weight of Hope" (John 11:1, 44)

The gospel of John presents Jesus' encounter with Lazarus as a masterclass in theological tension: the clash between human grief and divine power, death and resurrection, faith and doubt. When Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus had fallen ill, already four days dead (11:17), the disciples' reaction reveals something profound about the human experience of loss. Mary's confession, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (v. 28), cuts to the heart of modern mourning: the way faith often collides with the reality of suffering, where words like "why?" echo in silence. Jesus' response is deliberate: "This sickness will not end in death,

but for the glory of God that the Son of Man may be glorified" (v. 4). Here, the Gospel writer exposes a tension central to Christian theology, how death, far from being an end, becomes a stage for God's redemptive work.

The journey to Bethany is marked by tension. Jesus' friends urge him to stay, "Do not go back" (v. 5), while Mary's "I know he will rise again" (v. 24) suggests she understands resurrection as a future hope, not yet a present reality. Yet Jesus' insistence, "Take away the stone" (v. 34), contrasts sharply with human instinct to flee or avoid. The stench of death is visceral; the command to undo what the body has sealed is radical. For high schoolers grappling with grief, loss, or existential questions, this scene is a mirror: death always feels like a wall, but Jesus' command is an invitation to ask, "What if the stone isn't just a metaphor?" The resurrection of Lazarus isn't a proof of God's power but a practice of how faith moves beyond the limits of human perception.

Jesus' act of raising Lazarus is a symbolic reversal, one that resonates with real-world struggles. Death, for centuries, has been seen as the ultimate enemy, but here it becomes a battleground where God's power is displayed. The crowd's reaction, "See how he loved them" (v. 45), isn't mere awe; it's a declaration that love doesn't shy away from suffering. For the disciples (and us), this story is a reminder that faith isn't about avoiding pain but transforming it. Theologian John Stackhouse argues that Lazarus' resurrection isn't just about overcoming death but redefining it, from a finality to a passage toward something greater. In a world where depression, trauma, and existential despair often feel inescapable, this passage challenges: "What if the 'last' chapter in our lives isn't the end, but the beginning of resurrection?"

The final irony is this: Jesus' greatest work here is not to erase death but to invite us into its shadow. Lazarus doesn't return fully healed, he's buried again, and the story ends with his body still resting. Yet the miracle lingers: death, though real, is not the last word. This tension, between what is and what could be, is the heart of Christian hope. For high schoolers wrestling with identity, purpose, or mortality, the question remains: What stone will we choose to undo? Will we let grief harden us, or will we, like Martha, confess, "Even now, we believe that You are the Messiah" (v. 27)? The story doesn't answer for us, it places the question before us.

This passage matters because it forces us to confront the limits of human logic and the necessity of faith. Theologian N.T. Wright notes that resurrection isn't just about the dead being raised; it's about the living being raised to new life. Lazarus' story isn't just a proof of God's power, it's a call to trust that in our darkest moments, something deeper than death is at work. As we navigate our own battles, the challenge is to hold both the reality of pain and the hope of resurrection without denying either. The question for us is: Will we believe that love, though delayed, will eventually undo the stone?

--- Real-World Application: Consider this: What modern "stones" (e.g., mental health struggles, broken relationships, systemic injustice) feel like unmovable? How can we, like Jesus, ask ourselves: What if the end isn't death, but the beginning of something new? The story invites reflection, not just on Lazarus' life, but on our own. Would we trust, like Martha, that God's glory is worth the wait?

Key Verse

John 11:25 , 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me will live, even though they die.'

John 11:25 reveals Jesus' divine claim over death itself, His identity as "the resurrection and life" transforms existential dread into hope. Belief in Him doesn't guarantee an easy life (the verse allows for physical death), but it guarantees eternal life where suffering, loss, or even death itself lose their finality, because God's power redefines what truly matters. Theological connection: This verse ties into the Christian doctrine of trinitarian resurrection, Jesus as the firstfruits of a new creation (1 Cor. 15:20, 23), where death is conquered not by individual power but by God's ultimate act of love. It challenges us to reject fatalism, embrace faith as an active stance against entropy, and trust in a future where every scar tells a story of restoration. Real-world application: At its core, this verse asks: If death is not the end, how do we live in the face of loss? It calls for bold faith in the midst of brokenness, whether grief, failure, or existential questioning. It's not about escaping suffering but transforming how we carry it, trusting that God's power to raise the dead (metaphorically or literally) can also raise our spirits

from despair. The question isn't, "Will I die?" but "Will I live, eternally?", and that's where belief in Christ changes everything.

Activities

Activity 1:

A debate-style activity where students role-play as Jesus, Lazarus' family, or skeptical bystanders to dissect power, doubt, and the nature of divine intervention.

1. Contextual Discussion (2 min):
2. Begin by asking: "How do you interpret the idea that death is not the final word? Lead a brief discussion on Lazarus' raising, what does it reveal about God's power over suffering?"
3. (Use John 11:4, 25, 26: "The Son of Man must be lifted up... whoever believes in Him will not die but have eternal life.")
4. Creative Task (5 min):
5. Split into pairs. Each pair will create a symbolic art piece (e.g., a cross, a tomb, or a scene from the story).
6. Use one sheet of paper to represent Lazarus' tomb and another to represent his resurrection.
7. Focus on duality: What does the tomb symbolize? How does the resurrection outshine it? (Encourage layers, e.g., a cracked tomb with light breaking through.)
8. Theological Reflection (3 min):
9. Share art pieces (voluntarily) and discuss:
10. How does your artwork capture the contrast between death and life?
11. What real-world implications does Lazarus' resurrection have for those facing loss?
12. Real-World Application (5 min):
13. Connect to suffering: "What modern struggles (illness, grief, injustice) might this passage inspire hope for?" Write brief notes on how faith can be tested yet affirmed.
2. "The Weight of Faith: Debate Simulation"
15. Preparation (3 min):
16. Assign roles (e.g., Mary/Martha, Jesus, "The Doubters", people who argue Lazarus' death was inevitable). Assign 2, 4 students per side.
17. Remind students to use biblical text (John 11:21, 37, 41, 44) to guide arguments.
18. Debate Structure (10 min):
19. Opening Statements (2 min/side):
20. Mary/Martha: Argue Lazarus' raising reflects God's love and justice.
21. Jesus: Emphasize His divine authority ("I am the resurrection", John 11:25).
22. Doubters: Challenge Jesus' claim (e.g., "Is this really God's work?").
23. Counterarguments (3 min/side):
24. Encourage rebuttals using Scripture (e.g., "Did God not love Lazarus enough to spare him?").
25. Closing (2 min/side):
26. Reflect on personal stakes: "How might this scene apply to someone struggling with faith?"
27. Theological Analysis (5 min):
28. Discuss:
29. Why does Jesus choose to act now, despite the delay?
30. What does this say about God's justice vs. mercy in suffering?
31. Connect to modern faith: "How might this passage challenge or comfort someone facing a crisis?"
32. Key Themes Across Activities:

33. Resurrection as Power: Lazarus' raising mirrors Christ's, but how does this change faith in suffering?
34. Faith vs. Doubt: How do Mary/Martha's faith and the doubters' skepticism reflect real theological tension?
35. Real-World Application: Connecting to loss, illness, or injustice with Scripture as both comfort and challenge.
36. Both activities encourage critical thinking, creative expression, and practical engagement with the text. Would you like adaptations for different group sizes or additional scripture focus?

Discussion Questions

- Here are four intellectually engaging, open-ended discussion questions that explore the theological depth of Jesus raising Lazarus (John 11:1-44), while encouraging students to reflect on its real-world implications:
- 1. Faith and the Limits of Human Understanding
 - "In John 11, Mary and Martha grieve not just for Lazarus but for the meaning of his death, how his absence will change their lives forever. Jesus' response is both a miracle and a confrontation: 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' (John 11:40).
 - How might this passage challenge or deepen your understanding of what it means to 'believe' in God's power, not just in abstract trust, but in the face of suffering that feels utterly unjust? Do you think Jesus is asking His disciples (and us) to accept the paradox of faith: that God's glory is revealed precisely in the moments we cannot explain? Where in your own life do you struggle to believe that God's purposes, even in suffering, are for good?"
- 2. Death and the Body of Christ: Resurrection as Community
 - "The resurrection of Lazarus is a body resurrection, not just an individual triumph, but a proclamation that God redeems relationships as well as lives. Jesus calls Martha, 'your brother,' and asks her to 'see the glory of God' in Lazarus' return. How might this story speak to the way modern society often separates people from one another, through technology, distance, or even trauma, and how resurrection might invite us to reimagine what it means to be 'raised' in a broken world?
 - Consider: What 'dead' relationships in your community (family, friendships, even faith groups) might God be calling you to 'raise' through faith, patience, or courage? How could Lazarus' story encourage you to engage with people you might otherwise avoid?"
- 3. Theological Dilemmas: Love vs. Justice in Suffering
 - "Jesus weeps with Martha and Mary, then immediately commands Lazarus to 'come out.' Some scholars argue this is a theological dilemma: On one hand, Jesus is a sign of divine justice (restoring what was stolen), but on the other, He is also a sign of divine patience, allowing Lazarus to die so he could be raised fully alive. How do you reconcile these two truths?
 - In a world where suffering often feels like divine punishment or random chaos, how does this passage compel you to think about God's justice and love? Do you see Lazarus' resurrection as proof of God's justice, or as an invitation to trust in God's deeper purposes, even when the path isn't immediately clear? How might this challenge your own assumptions about why people suffer?"
- 4. Practical Faith and the "Unseen" God
 - "The story ends with the disciples asking, 'Why did you not come earlier?' (John 11:45). Jesus' answer is cryptic: 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'
 - If you had to explain this passage to someone who believes God's power is only visible in miracles or grand events (like Jesus' first coming), how would you respond? How might this story encourage you to practice faith in the everyday 'unseen' moments, when God's presence isn't obvious but still active (e.g., healing, restoration, or even the quiet resilience of people like Martha and Mary)?"
- Follow-up Suggestion:
 - After these discussions, you could have students write a short reflection or response in pairs, asking:

- "Where in your own life do you see God's 'resurrection', whether through small acts of healing, broken relationships being mended, or even in moments of deep suffering where you've had to choose to believe? How does this compare to Lazarus' story?"
- These questions invite students to engage with the text at a spiritual and ethical level while connecting it to their own experiences. Would you like any adjustments to align more closely with a specific theological tradition?

Prayer Focus

"Lord, as we study the story of Lazarus, where faith meets the weight of human suffering, where Jesus confronts the limits of grief, and where resurrection defies the rules of death, teach us to encounter Your presence in the stillness of our own lives. May we learn to trust You not just in grand moments, but in the quiet, everyday callings where hope is tested, where doubt lingers, and where Your power to restore lives, even in ways unseen, redefines our future. Amen."

>> Missions Spotlight

In Madagascar, the Famadihana ceremony involves exhuming the dead and celebrating their lives. The concept of resurrection is deeply embedded in the culture. Missionaries share that Jesus doesn't just remember the dead, He raises them to life.

-> To the Cross

Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb, even though He knew He was about to raise him. Jesus felt the pain that death causes. Then He raised Lazarus, showing He has power over death. At the cross, Jesus Himself would die and rise again, conquering death forever.