

Missed Opportunities

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

4 January 2026

Children's Talk: Second Chances

1. We had an opportunity, now it's gone for good
 - a. Superficial: to be popular, to be a good student, to have friends, to know what you want to do with life, etc.
 - b. Real: be kind, have good habits,
 - c. Look around, it looks like everyone else has it figured out and you don't, you missed the boat somehow.
 - d. What are the stupid things you've done, last week, years ago, that if you had been a little bit wiser, you would not have done? But now you are stuck, forever, with the consequences?
2. We don't notice the second chances we are being given
 - a. We regret: if only, if I had just, if I knew then what I know now, things would have been so different.
 - b. John 11:20-27:

Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

- c. Lord, *if* you had been here...
3. We have to trust that the Lord is always giving Second chances
 - a. So focused on the "Lord, if you had been here" we miss the fact that the Lord can fix it.
 - b. Whatever it is, yes it will be hard, but you will keep missing chances if you don't think they are there.
 - c. Let go of what could have been, and trust that the Lord is offering something better now (He is).
 - d. Do you believe that the Lord can still give you a better life than you thought possible, in spite of having not done those things that you think would have given you a better life?

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Part I: The Death of Lazarus

It is frustrating when we miss an opportunity for something good: you notice too late that a band is coming to town or you notice the sale at your favorite store only after it has ended. Even with minor things like these we can fall into a cycle of regret. It is impossible to go back and change what happened, but we like to dwell on what might have been, if only we had known.

This same mindset troubles us spiritually, when we sense that we have lost our chance to become the good people that we want to be. It is not pleasant to think, “if I had made different choices earlier today, or last week, or last year, right now I would be a kinder, better, happier person. But since I missed my chance, I’ll never be quite as good as I could have been. Today we are going explore the story of Lazarus as it shows us what we can do around missed opportunities and how we can break that cycle of regret.

The story opens with Lazarus, a friend of Jesus’, being sick. His two sisters send for Jesus, hoping that He will be able to heal Lazarus. To all appearances, Lazarus and his sisters have nothing to worry about. This general trust is one that we hopefully all experience: we trust that the Lord will work things out, that we can deal with our lives, and that when things go wrong we will still be able to get by. When a problem does arise, like Lazarus’ sickness, we pray for help or for clarity, decide what actions are best, and then act to resolve the issue. And sometimes that works perfectly well. But sometimes it goes not at all well: in the story, the Lord does not get to Lazarus in time; and in our own stories we belatedly realize that we have done too little too late.

Once we do look back and see the mistakes we have made in spite of our best efforts, it is easy to blame the Lord. It seems so unfair: when we try hard and have the right intentions, shouldn't everything work out? How is that we still fail to see the mistakes we are making until it is too late? Why couldn't you have given me these insights then, when they could have made a difference? If the Lord had given you these insights a few hours ago, you would have made a better choice. If you had known what you know now years ago, you would have been spared so much. We then can turn to the Lord with the accusing words that Mary and Martha used:

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

- Lord, if you had been there, I would have kept my cool and not blown up in anger at the cashier and the manager.
- Lord, if you had been there, I would have thought better about blowing off my friend's party without telling her, and realized how important it actually was to her.
- Lord, if you had been there I wouldn't have jumped in and corrected so-and-so, and only later realized how embarrassing it was for them.
- Lord, if you had been there, I wouldn't have turned what could have been a meaningful conversation into a stupid argument.

We have longer term mistakes as well, which can be far more upsetting:

- Lord, if you had been there, I could have seen the signs in a relationship, and I would have been able to do something to fix it, to treat them differently, but now it is too late.
- Lord, if you had been there, I could have seen the mistakes I was making as a parent and my children would not be where they are now.

- Lord, if you had been there, I would not have gotten caught up in negative habits in my youth and only now see the destruction and the hold that it has on me, that I cannot escape.

We had the chance to have great relationship and a good life and be people who others could rely on, we had the chance to really have a positive impact on the world, but now we are stuck with the consequences of our mistakes. We didn't see quite *how* to do the right thing, or if we did see it, we couldn't see how significant it would become later in life. And for some reason, in spite of our best efforts, the Lord did not show us the way clearly enough. We are left in a position of thinking that we are beyond the Lord's help, like Lazarus, now dead. The mistakes have been made, they are now part of who I am, and I cannot go back to correct them.

Part II: Mary and Martha Meet the Lord

Our response comes in two forms, represented by Martha and Mary, as our minds give a more intellectual response alongside a more emotional or will-oriented response. Martha represents the more intellectual side of our minds. She runs out to meet the Lord. First she says the words we have already talked about, but then carries on:

Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give You.

And when Jesus responds that her brother will rise again, she states:

I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

There is a kind of optimistic resignation in her voice. She trusts the Lord intellectually, as she knows that he will end up in heaven someday. This is what the intellectual part of our mind does when faced with having blown our chance: time heals all wounds, it will be sorted out in heaven, but there is not much we can do ourselves.

Jesus on the other hand has more immediate hope to offer. He tells her that far from having to wait until the last judgment, true life and resurrection is present here and now. He says,

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?

And this is of course the question for us: we may acknowledge the technicality that time heals all wounds, perhaps when we are dead and in the afterlife. Do we believe that the Lord, the source of life, is here and now? Do we believe that He has the power to heal us? In short, do we believe that the Lord actually can regenerate us, turning our selfishness into selflessness? Can He make our lives, or even just today a worthwhile day? Martha's answer is a yes:

Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.

In other words, I believe that you are Divine, and so have the power to regenerate me, in spite of all my faults and flaws and evil choices. Without this acknowledgment we would never be able to see the new opportunities the Lord is giving us right now. We would only see the lost opportunities in the past. That is the first step: acknowledge that the Lord does have the power to make us better people, in spite of past mistakes. We have to be open to the second chances that the Lord is giving us all the time, and to be open to them, we have to believe that they are there. We will not see them otherwise.

But that is not all the battle, as we still must account for Mary. Mary represents the deeper part of our mind, the will. She simply comes, falls at His feet, and says,

Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.

Acknowledging the Lord intellectually, like Martha is not enough. We must be like Mary who falls at the Lord's feet. Our mind believes in some kind of hope: our heart knows that we will never make it. We need to be willing, even at that level, to submit to His will. We need to not just acknowledge Him, but to also be willing to change our actions and behaviors. That is what will actually restore us and bring us back from our failures.

Recap: first, acknowledge, in spite of resignation, that the Lord can give us a new life, and that He is here now, regardless of where He was before. Look for the second chances.

Second, take on a humble attitude of doing and following the Lord in actions and in your heart.

Part III: The Lord Raises Lazarus

The Lord then orders the tomb to be opened. Martha objects. The corpse has been dead for four days, it will stink. Yet still the Lord orders them to open the tomb, telling her,

Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God? This is the third step for us: revisit that part of our life that has died. We object, of course. That part of my life is dead. It's a corpse. It stinks. We feel shame. Or regret. Or despair. We know that we cannot go back and fix things, so why try? And still the Lord urges us: if you believe, you will see the glory of God.

What is the dead part of your life? The part of your life that you resent God, maybe even just a little bit, for not fixing? For not being there when you needed Him? Go there. Dig it up. Examine it. Maybe the Lord can help with your anger. Maybe you can become a different person. Maybe your children, or your friends, or your spouse,

are all different, maybe you cannot go back and fix things with those specific people. But you can become a new person in all those areas of life.

The Lord is the resurrection and the life. Acknowledge that life. Be willing to change and grow under his guidance. Let go of the resentment that He did not fix things sooner. And be willing to confront that part of your life that is dead. If He never allowed us to make mistakes, we would never trust Him fully. When the story began, they knew that the Lord could heal sickness. But by the end, they knew that they need not even be afraid of death. When have this kind of trust we can see the Lord has guided us even through our worst failures. We have a tendency to look back and see the Lord present only in success; but the reality is that even through the worst failures the Lord's hand is still guiding us, making sure that we never lose our chance for reform and salvation. The Teachings of the New Church emphasize that this leading is present in every last detail of life:

A person who has become spiritual by his acknowledgement of God and wise by his renunciation of his native character, sees Divine providence in the whole world and in each and every constituent of it. If he contemplates natural phenomena he sees it. If he contemplates civil affairs he sees it. If he contemplates spiritual matters he sees it. And this in both the concurrent and sequential occurrences of things. In ends, in causes, in effects, in useful endeavors, in forms, in things great and small, he sees it. Especially does he see it in the salvation of people - as in the fact that Jehovah provided the Word, that by it He taught them about God, heaven and hell, and eternal life, and that He came into the world to redeem and save mankind. (*Divine Providence* §189)

When we put all of our trust in the Lord, and He leads us, we then know that no matter what chances we have missed, no matter how far we have fallen, we can always recover. Our opportunities do not fail us until the day that we die. The Lord is able to heal us. As He says,

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.