

**THE LAZARUS  
LIFE**



**STEPHEN W. SMITH**

**THE LAZARUS  
LIFE**

**spiritual transformation  
for ordinary people**

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*transforming lives together*

THE LAZARUS LIFE

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**THE LAZARUS LIFE**

*is dedicated to*

*Lazarus of Bethany, first century AD,*

*Giotto di Bondone, fourteenth century AD,*

*and*

*Dallas Willard, twenty-first century AD,*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing an ordinary book on such an extraordinary subject has been its own unparalleled journey for me. It's been exhilarating and exhausting. I have known about Lazarus for many years, as you may have as well. But it was not until I was thumbing through an art book that I saw, as if for the first time, more than I had ever seen before from John's account in his gospel. Page after page of art revealed Lazarus emerging from the tomb. Primitive, medieval, Renaissance, and modern artists all tried to convey on canvas what John was saying in his gospel. Each painting tells a different part of the story but all say the same thing—the Lazarus life is possible!

Together, the paintings and gospel made for me a sort of movie to look at anytime I wanted or needed. I began to see myself in the paintings, especially the one featured in this book by Giotto di Bondone. Giotto is recognized as a pioneer of sorts because he was among the first of the Italian painters to offer mood, expressions, and emotions in his paintings. He is widely recognized to be an important figure in the Italian Renaissance painting movement. As Giotto painted the Lazarus story, some of the observers have halos; some do not. Some are recoiling from Lazarus; some are touching him. Some are worshipping, and some are doubting. Lazarus is present, of course, but barely alive

and fully wrapped in the dreadful graveclothes. It's as if Giotto was determined to put each of us there—right in the middle of the story—standing with Jesus and Lazarus at some unique stage of our spiritual journey.

I don't think I will ever be “done” with Lazarus. I hope you won't either. As I discovered some of the insights Lazarus offers us, I began to give talks, preach sermons, and use Lazarus as a tool to help people understand how transformation actually happens. The results were almost always so encouraging that I began to realize something was “up” that I needed to pay attention to and develop more. I am indebted to each artist who painted and each writer who ever penned a word about this amazing man named Lazarus. Each of you has helped me in such a significant way.

I had the privilege of working with several publishers to decide the best fit for *The Lazarus Life*. In the end I chose David C. Cook to publish this book, and I'm very glad I did. David C. Cook itself is transforming and has adopted the tagline of “Transforming Lives Together,” which you will see on the back cover of this book. I was particularly interested in David C. Cook because of its commitment to the local church—a place I have lived and spent all of my working life trying to help. My deepest thanks to the David C. Cook team for believing in this project and for offering me John Blase as my editor, who crafted the words when I was stuck or afraid and polished all the others. You dreamed the dream with me, and together we see more than a book emerging between the two of us. Special thanks to Elisa Fryling Stanford, who spent hours with me developing the chapters, filling in missing pieces, and enlarging my own understanding of *The Lazarus Life*. We both

recognized that *The Lazarus Life* seemed to take on a life that was bigger, deeper, and wider than words typed on a computer or printed on a page. May it be so!

Throughout the writing of this book, dear friends have stood with me who not only know about transformation but who for me are trophies of transformation. Among you are: Rick Campbell, John and Denise Kapitan, Chuck and Kim Millsap, Sean and Kathy Buchanan, Lea and Susie Courtney, Russell and Kate Courtney, Jim and Renee Hughes, Frank Rudy, Bob and Sherry Sprotte, Jim and Leta Van Meter, Scott and Beth Shaum, and Greg and Yvonne Meyer.

I am deeply indebted to the supporters of the Potter's Inn ministry. You faithfully stand with us and generously support the ongoing ministry of our retreats, soul care, and the development of resources such as this important one.

The stories in this book are all true, but the names have been changed to protect the guilty and the transformed! Each person who has sat with me and talked with me has in fact become a mentor to help me to understand the lingering Jesus, the smelly graveclothes, and the ongoing miracle of transformation more deeply. Thank you. Special thanks to the readers who not only read the manuscript, but offered insight into how to strengthen it.

Along my own journey of transformation, I have found companions—some literary and some in the flesh—who have walked with me and who took hold of my own graveclothes and pushed me forward to Jesus. You are Craig and Beryl Glass, Paula Rinehart, Dallas Willard, David Benner, Henri Nouwen, Ray and Lynn Walkowski, Michael and Hallie Doyle, Gloria Smith Schwartz (my beloved sister), Gwen

H. Smith (my very beloved wife), and Blake, Jordan, Cameron, and Leighton Smith (my very beloved sons).

I also thank my parents, Sonny and Rena Smith, for helping me understand my deepest desire and my most profound need—to experience authentic transformation.

*Stephen W. Smith*

*Potter's Inn at Aspen Ridge*

*Divide, Colorado*

# I AM LAZARUS: FINDING OURSELVES IN THE STORY

*Now a man named Lazarus was sick.*

*He was from Bethany ...*

—as told by John, the beloved disciple in John 11:1

- We are all soul-sick and in need of transformation.
- Transformation does not come from earning love. It comes from being loved.
- Only Jesus offers us the life we long for.
- The story of Lazarus is the story of the Christian life.

I am Lazarus. And I believe you are too. His story is our story. I'd like to invite you to come with me into this story, a story that I trust you'll come to see as your own, as I've come to see it as mine. It is the ongoing story of someone who is experiencing transformation. Someone who needs a miracle to be whole.

*The Lazarus Life* is the story of our longing for deep and lasting change. But it is more than that—much more than that. The story is an invitation to live, but this invitation will prove to be like none you've ever received before.

As we accept this invitation, we'll see Lazarus getting weaker and more desperate for healing, asking us to evaluate our own spiritual condition. When all the efforts of friends and relatives fail to persuade Jesus to show up and fix the situation, we'll be invited to explore the hidden resentments held in our own hearts about a Jesus who doesn't always show up on time—and about our own community of well-intentioned family and friends who often fail us. When Lazarus dies and is placed in a tomb, an invitation will surface to peer into the dark places in our own lives, the dark places that keep us buried when we long for new life. When Lazarus hears a voice—not just any voice, but the voice of Jesus—we, too, can learn how to listen for that same voice today when it calls us to move forward. As Lazarus gets “unraveled” from his situation, we can become unstuck from our own, even if it's a messy process. When Lazarus emerges from the tomb trapped in graveclothes, we'll examine the “graveclothes” of our lives—such as self-rejection, fear, sin, guilt, blame and shame, and disappointment—that hold us back from renewed spiritual vigor. And when Lazarus steps into his new, resurrected life, we will see a hint of the life that

Jesus invites us to today—the dangerous, rewarding, radical, powerful life of transformation.

The story of Lazarus is about longings and breakthroughs. It is about unmet expectations and disillusionment with God. It is about overcoming obstacles. It is about facing our disappointments so that we can move forward. It is about freedom and life. Yes—life! The life that Jesus described when He said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Maybe we’re burned out in ministry, work, family, or all of the above. Maybe we’re tired of waiting for the circumstances of our lives to change. Maybe we find ourselves buried in a tomb, overwhelmed with both past and future, yet God is calling us forth to something that “may be”—to a better life than we ever dreamed.<sup>1</sup>

## LOOKING FOR SOMETHING MORE

We’re not the first people to be moved toward abundant life through Lazarus’s story. Buried under the sprawling city of Rome are darkened catacombs, the place of burial for early believers. Many of these early Christians were persecuted, terrorized, and ill-treated. Yet the story of Lazarus so inspired these Christians that ordinary people—not theologians, priests, or popes—painted artistic renditions on frescoes that we can still see today. In fact more than sixty renditions of the raising of Lazarus can be found etched and painted on the dark walls of the tunnels that lead to the burial sites. Those ancient limestone walls reveal images of Jesus Christ at an opened tomb from which a bound, mummy-like man is emerging.

As grieving families of days long gone came to these burial places, these paintings reminded them that what happened to Lazarus could happen to them. After all, the best stories in life—the ones that inspire us most—are about men and women who long for the same things we do. They are stories of people who encounter something or someone who changes the trajectory of their lives.

The story of Lazarus, an ordinary man living in the first century, is this kind of story. It inspired Italian Renaissance painters such as Giotto and Caravaggio to take brightly colored oils to plain white canvas and show us what mere words fail to convey. The Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh so identified with the story of Lazarus in his final years that he painted his own face as the transformed face of Lazarus emerging from the tomb. I'm currently in a season of feeling much the same way as van Gogh might have felt: Life is finally beginning to happen. I don't want to go back to the way it was. I want to live the life Jesus wants me to live. Do you?

If we hear of Lazarus today, it's usually standing at a freshly dug graveside. The pastor reads the famous words of Jesus: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25). These words are supposed to bring comfort. But Jesus' words were *never* meant for the dead. They were meant for those who are alive—we are the people who need the message of Lazarus to bring hope to our weary lives. We are the ones who need transformation. *The Lazarus Life* offers us an opportunity to experience what we long for most.

Early in the book of John, we read about Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding celebration. He transforms water. Later, John shows

Jesus multiplying the loaves and fish to feed the thousands. He transforms loaves and fish. These miracles drew people to God. But when we come to John 11, we leave water and fish and loaves behind, and transformation takes place in flesh and blood—the life of an ordinary person named Lazarus. This one life so stirs us now that we wish it could be us.

## MORE TO LIFE

Like Lazarus, you and I know what it is like to *not* be transformed.

- Unaffected by the power of God.
- Unaltered by the promises of Jesus.
- Impervious as a granite slab to the penetrating work of the Spirit.

It is possible to lead a wholesome life—one in which we maintain a job, marry a person we love, have children, bury our parents, and attend the church of our choice—and still miss out on what Jesus promised we could have. We might call it living a wholesome life of quiet desperation.

The spiritual life is first of all a *life* or it is no life at all. It is more than the emotions of love, hatred, passion, and desire, more than rationally deciding what to eat and where to sleep and what to believe. Yes, we are created by God to live a physical life with eyes that see, hearts that beat, and hands that touch. And yes, we are created to live an emotional life with passions and desires, and an intellectual life with our own will.

But many of the men and women I know and work with say they feel more dead than alive, more asleep than awake, more numb than

passionate. Why is this so? Why do so many of us follow the teachings of Jesus and quietly ask, “Is this it? Is this the life Jesus told us about? Isn’t there something *more*?” Lazarus shows us the “more” of life that you and I are thirsty for. More than what we know now—so that we can live before we die.

John the Baptist said it this way: “It’s your life that must change, not your skin.... What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming?” (Luke 3:8–9 MSG). The life Jesus describes in the story of Lazarus is not an improvement to our standard of living. It is not a secret to be learned or a formula to follow.<sup>2</sup> The spiritual life offered by Jesus, taught to us by Paul, and experienced by the early church, is a life of transformation. It is deep-down change at the DNA level of our souls. It is a life that comes only from Jesus, who identifies *Himself* as the only life we need.

## SOUL-SICKNESS

It doesn’t take us long in life to realize that what the Bible says is true: No one is sinless.<sup>3</sup> No one escapes being soul-sick. Our sickness seems to repeat itself across the pages and chapters of our lives. It even follows a predictable pattern: We make resolutions and promises to God, and we try to change, but we relapse. We take two steps forward but the one step back nearly always does us in. We muster up the energy to try to break an addiction, to rid ourselves of a self-destructive habit, to not be “so angry, so overweight, so anxious, so doubting, so obsessive, so self-ish” or whatever it is (is there ever only one thing?) that brings dis-ease to our souls and makes us desperate.

This is what Dallas Willard calls “sin management”—when we use

our own effort to try to control sin rather than dealing with it once and for all. A little bit of cyber-sex isn't as bad as being an addict, is it? A little bit of guilt, a little bit of anger, a little bit of envy is better than a life consumed with it, right? We try to manage our heart, mind, soul, and strength the best we can. All the while, however, the life that Jesus promised seems just beyond our grasp. The joy and passion that God intended for our lives feels like the cookie jar we'll never be tall enough to reach.

Aren't we tired of changing just enough to get by? Change from the outside might look good at church on Sunday, but it leaves us empty and restless the other six days of the week.<sup>4</sup> Pseudo-transformation doesn't touch our deepest soul-sickness. It doesn't move us beyond the issues, problems, and sins that keep us from experiencing the life Jesus promised.<sup>5</sup> Pseudo-transformation leaves us sick because when we don't really change, we have to live with the residue of guilt and shame over our repeated attempts to get life right.

A life outside the tomb is what we want. Real life. Authentic life. The abundant life that Jesus promises. The story of Lazarus offers us an opportunity to explore how transformation really happens—sometimes in the places we least expect it.

## THE CEREAL STARE

Once upon a time, there was a little boy who joined his father every morning for breakfast. He sat down at the table hoping and longing for a time of substance with this man called Dad. But instead of engaging conversation or rib-tickling jokes or even, "What's on tap for today?" he was always served the same dish: the "Cereal Stare."

The Cereal Stare. The look that would overtake the father's eyes as his mind wandered to another country—a place of work deadlines, problems with a colleague, a crisis that had claimed his mind and heart, possibly even unfulfilled hopes and dreams. The father sat in this stare while the young boy looked on, always an arm's length away but never invited to this distant land.

The father chewed his Corn Flakes and the boy chewed his. The closest they came to one another was carrying their empty bowls to the kitchen sink. The father then went to work to engage in ways he could not or did not at home. The white Pontiac drove away, leaving the boy in the dust, unable to see his true way.

I began this chapter by saying, "I am Lazarus." And I am. However, once upon a time, Lazarus was a little boy. And I was too. The Corn Flakes were real. As was the little boy. And the father. It's difficult to write these words, for my intent is not to place blame, but to witness. Many of the men of my father's generation were emotionally distant. They found it difficult to give what they had never received themselves. It was for my dad. I understand that.

My father was a good provider. We always had breakfast on the table. But man doesn't live by breakfast alone. Neither do little boys. And the boy with a hungry heart grew into a man who was soul-sick—me. I cannot recall ever hearing the words from my father that I most needed and longed for: "I love you, Steve." I had to assume it. I had to imagine, guess, or suppose that I was loved and worthy to be loved. Through the chapters of my life, this same theme—the need to hear I was loved, accepted, and validated—emerged and reared its head like a dragon. I would fight and wound the dragon momentarily, but the

beast refused to die. My soul-sickness crept into every job I had, every friendship I developed, and every person I touched, even my wife and sons. I routinely found myself distant, captured in a stare of my own. Harry Chapin's 1974 hit "Cat's in the Cradle" became all too true for me: I had grown up to be just like Dad.

## WHEN LOVE IS WITHHELD

Psychologists tell us that self-love is either acquired in life or it is non-existent. No one is born with it. As children we look to our mothers and fathers to give our hearts what they so desperately need. In these early years things can go wonderfully right, and this is also the season of our lives when things can go woundingly wrong.

When love is withheld, the heart cannot thrive. Life without love has no meaning apart from doing things, performing, producing, and achieving. When affirmation, acceptance, and self-worth are withheld from us, or not nurtured to grow within us, we're left with holes. And we've got to fill the holes with something. Far too early we learn grown-up words like:

Achieve.

Strive.

Acquire.

Conquer.

This is exactly what I did. I learned how to be loved by doing, performing, and achieving. I became a go-getter so that I would be going somewhere—anywhere that I could feel loved. I sold the most tickets to the school barbecue and was rewarded for doing so. I became funny so I

would be liked. I was responsible so that I would be respected. I earned love from others, and I tried to earn love from God. I lived in the land of the if-then's:

If I was good, then ...

If I was committed, then ...

If I went to church multiple times a week, then ...

The more I did these things, the more celebrated and valued I felt. People applauded when I quoted Scripture. Men shook my hand and women produced teary-eyed smiles when I told them at five years of age, "I'm going to be a missionary to China." In those tender years I, like so many people, learned to live out of two stories: One was public and the other was very private—reserved only for those I felt would understand me. Those private stories are where the work of transformation is so desperately needed.

In public I learned the system, and I worked it. To be loved, I needed to do the right things, act the right way, and accomplish great tasks. A young man or woman can do this quite well for several decades, which is exactly what I did. I did extraordinary things for approval and acceptance.

I put all my trophies, jobs, and accomplishments in those holes in my soul. But the ache would not quit. My heart knew that something was wrong. All of my achieving was not filling a heart that was needy for love—simple love. In close relationships, demanding work, and inner longings, my soul-sickness showed up again and again. I've been on a long road to discover that no man as a friend, woman as a lover, or vocation as significance can offer me what Jesus offered Lazarus—life.

The story of Lazarus invites us into the truth that transformation does not begin with earning love. Transformation does not depend on our efforts to “make” it happen. Transformation begins when you *are* loved. This is what happened to Lazarus. Earthly flesh and blood can never speak this kind of deep love to our hearts. Only the Voice of Love will do. Only love transforms. Not power. Not coercion. Not programs. Not tips and techniques. Only love—and only the love of God.

## EVERY SOUL NEEDS HEALING

Your concerns and soul-sickness may not be the same as mine, but something is bringing your soul a dis-ease—a longing for something different from the life you’ve been living so far. What is your soul-sickness? The holes in your soul? What are you living with that you wish you could change about yourself?

The name *Lazarus* means “whom God helps.” We need Jesus’ help just as Lazarus did. When we find ourselves sick and tired of being sick and tired, only God’s help will do. The same breath that filled the deflated lungs of Lazarus and brought him back to life can be breathed into you and me. The same sickness—the sickness of thinking we can earn God’s love—that brings death has an answer in Jesus.

This tightly bound and mummified Lazarus emerges with the only thing that matters—the only thing that really counts. Life—sheer, unbridled, and resurrected life—is finally his. And because I believe we’re all Lazarus, it can be ours, too.

## JESUS DID MORE THAN MAKE A POINT

The Bible is full of stories like that of Lazarus, stories that go far beyond statements of fact. They confront us with a truth that engages the mind while seeping into the soul. Not simply truth—transforming truth. Truth that will unlock our hearts and prepare our minds to understand the mysteries of the spiritual life. Through story we can enter the drama of what is being told. Our senses are engaged; we can touch and hear and see and smell and taste all the things that facts are unable to deliver. Through Jesus' masterful use of metaphor, we become the prodigal son, the rocky soil, the shepherd searching for a lost sheep in danger.

A good story offers a window to peer through in order to see something we could never come up with on our own. A great story ignites something within us that can't be ignored and will never be forgotten. A good story informs us. A great story changes us.

So as you enter the story of Lazarus, put yourself in the Middle Eastern village of Bethany two thousand years ago. Feel the hot breeze on your face and the sun-baked dirt under your feet. Through your own God-given five senses, experience for yourself how one ordinary person can change.

To help you discover this incredible story with all your senses, the artist Giotto's rendering of the story of Lazarus is inside the front cover of this book.<sup>6</sup> It is one of my favorites. All the characters that John mentions are in this incredible scene that Giotto has magnificently captured. By reading the story of John and through Giotto's brush with oils, we can see ourselves as really being *in* the story. As we move into the story, we'll examine some of the different characters, and we'll look at how their reactions and insights to what happened that day might

inform our own lives today. I'll refer to the painting from time to time and I hope you will as well. It is a powerful image with the ability to prompt thought, reflection, and prayer.

Lazarus's story is not a sermon illustration, it's not a humorous anecdote, and it's not a formula for feeling good about the life of faith. It's nothing less than a gritty, sometimes raw, and gloriously real-life demonstration of spiritual transformation. When we enter this story, we will experience not just good ideas about how we can be transformed by God. We will experience true transformation.

*God is kind, but he's not soft.  
In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand  
and leads us into radical life-change.*

(Rom. 2:4 MSG)

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is how Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' famous words in John 10:10 where we are told that Jesus came to give us "real and eternal life, more and better life that they (we—you and I) ever dreamed of." (MSG).
- <sup>2</sup> Jesus said, "These words I speak to you are not mere additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundation words, words to build a life on (Luke 6:47 MSG).
- <sup>3</sup> Verses that help us understand our soul-sick status include: Romans 3:23, 6:23; 1 John 1:8–10.

- <sup>4</sup> Jesus' strong words about the fallacy of outside change were directed at the Pharisees who sought external changes but neglected lasting inside-out change. See Matthew 23:25–26.
- <sup>5</sup> A more thorough description of the contrasts between transformation and pseudo-transformation is found in *The Transformation of a Man's Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), Stephen W. Smith, editor.
- <sup>6</sup> Giotto di Bondone was an Italian pre-Renaissance painter whose work paved the new way for painters to express emotion and character in his art. Born in 1266, in Florence, Italy, Giotto's work allowed him to become well-known and widely praised both during his life until the present. For more information on Giotto de Bondone and other artists who painted Lazarus's resurrection, see [www.lazaruslife.com](http://www.lazaruslife.com).