

Facing Death

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[0:00] Before we read the Word of God, and many of you will know this news already, but I want to give you this introduction for those who don't know. On the 17th of January, I was diagnosed with advanced cancer, and the details of that were given me in greater measure on the 26th.

I've started chemotherapy treatment, although the condition is, humanly speaking, curable, and I have a short lifespan ahead of me. So I face the prospect of a near death. The church is praying. Many people are praying. And God is well able to do whatever he wants to do.

Well, our lives are immortal until God's work in us is finished on earth. And that's a very safe place to be, isn't it? But in truth, although that's my diagnosis, on the basis of medical knowledge, we all face the prospect of a near death.

And this morning is not about my story, but your story, everyone's individual story. And indeed, we all have individual stories. Many of them are still sensitively raw and very painful, not least for my dear wife and family.

I hope that what I say this morning is both truth-filled and sensitive and appropriate, particularly for those who may hear this by themselves via the web link. I'm really thoughtful about it. Many people say they want to listen in to this, but it's hard to listen by yourself.

[1:41] It's so much better, in a way, to be working in a group like this this morning. And if there is pain from this message, may it be a healthy pain that leads to life and hope.

May God be with you. This morning is not about my ideas, because that would be absolutely pathetic and useless.

Wouldn't it? That God's word to us through the Bible. God's word to us through the Bible. His word. The Bible has much to say on this, but scarcely better than the passage that we're going to look at this morning.

Please turn in your Bibles to John chapter 11. It's on page 1077, if you've got a church Bible, or get it on your app.

[2:42] John chapter 11. We're going to read from verses 1 to 44. I will use the screen. It's really just a prompt and a help, especially for those who don't have English as a first language.

And there will be the verses coming up there. But really, I want to speak to you face to face, eye to eye. And so bear that in mind.

Now, please open your Bibles and have them available through the message. John chapter 11. Jesus is nearing the end of his earthly life.

In just a few days, he himself is going to be facing death himself. But here is a passage, an interlude moment, as it were, which is, in a way, almost like a dry run of something that he himself is going to experience personally in just a short space of time.

Now, a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

[3:56] This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sister sent word to Jesus.

Lord, the one you love is sick. When he heard this, Jesus said, This sickness will not end in death. No.

It is for God's glory. So that God's Son may be glorified through it. Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

Then he said to his disciples, Let us go back to Judea. But Rabbi, they said, A short while ago, the Jews tried to stone you.

Yet you're going back there. Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light.

[4:58] It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light. After he had said this, he went on to tell them, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.

I'm going there to wake him up. His disciples replied, Lord, if you sleep, you'll get better. Jesus had been speaking of his death.

But his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And for your sake, I'm glad I was not there, so that you may believe.

Let us go to him. Then Thomas called Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

[6:06] Lord, Martha said to Jesus, If you'd been here, my brother would not have died, but I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.

Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know 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 will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she told him.

I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside.

The teacher is here, she said, and he's asking for you. And Mary heard this. She got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

[7:14] When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

Where have you laid him? He asked. Come and see, Lord, they replied. Jesus wept. And the Jews said, see how he loved him.

Some of them said, could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying? Jesus once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

Take away the stone, he said. But Lord, said Martha, the sister of the dead man, by this sign there's a bad odour. He's been there for four days.

[8:25] Then Jesus said, did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone.

Jesus looked up and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me. But I said this with the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, take off the grave clothes and let him go. The certainty of death.

Death stalks the passage we read and the passages immediately before and after. Please turn to chapter 10, verse 31. When Jesus was in Judea and he was facing the wrath of the rabble, again

the Jews picked up stones to stone him.

[9:53] They picked up stones to stone him. This is not idle stuff. Stoning was the punishment, the blasphemy. And they fully intended to kill him by the stone throwing.

So he'd just come out of that situation. And he's willing to go back into that again. Chapter 11, verse 16.

Thomas, called Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, let us also go that we may die with him. Thomas was sure that if they went back into that territory again, they would all die if they identified with Jesus.

Chapter 11, verse 45. Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary had seen him while Jesus did put their faith in him.

But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. And then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. What are we accomplishing? One of them, then Caiaphas, verse 49.

[11:05] who was the high priest that year, spoke up. You know nothing at all. You do not realise it's better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.

So you have the mob and now you have the high priest plotting to kill Jesus. And sandwiched in between these two sort of cataclysmic moments of Jesus' life and the thoughts that would have gone through his head is this very domestic situation which we have read about.

Sickness, probably a fever leading rapidly to death. Close-knit family devastated. Widespread grief. Life dislocated.

We can identify with this, can't we? The people of the Roman Emperor at the time of Jesus were too familiar with state violence and frequent domestic grief.

There were public spectacles of execution. Resistance was quelled not by imprisonment but by killing. There were high rates of infant mortality. There was low age life expectancy.

[12:27] Over 70 years since the end of the second war with rapid advances in medical prevention and care we're not so touched with death as those who lived even 100 years ago when many parents had to bury small infant children and the world wars left no family untouched.

Let alone we see a vast distance from the people who lived in Jesus' day when life was short difficult and early death was an expectation. But for us death is pushed to the margins.

Behind closed doors and normally dealt with swiftly and sanitized. So our close involvement with death is infrequent. I put myself this question and you don't have to put your hand up but how many of us have actually seen anyone die?

Our awareness is filtered it's mediated and desensitized by vicarious dying portrayed ever more gruesomely but in a strangely detached manner by the genteel world of midsummer murders or the gratuitous violence of Hollywood directors like Tarantino and Kramer and now invading the world of social media with live-screened suicide.

suicide. But it's not our everyday world is it? We can switch off and sign in again by a button and we're not personally affected.

[14:14] But this story challenges us because it is rich with reminders of real death. and the real effects it has on real people like you and me.

And one day we will not be onlookers at someone else's drama or share us in intimate grief but in any number of ways we will find ourselves to be the one who is facing death for ourselves.

the Bible puts it flatly and without exception. Hebrews 9 27 Man is destined to die once.

The older version of the Bible has it is appointed unto man once to die. Whatever you and I may think even fleetingly about this subject it is an unescapable reality and should demand our attention because for all of us it means the end of life as we currently know and experience it.

It's massive it's overwhelming and for millions of people apparently crushingly final. So because we love life we airbrush and photoshop the very thought of it to the dim margins of our consciousness.

[15:44] But this Bible passage doesn't allow us to do that. It forces us to confront the subject of death and the certainty of it. Let me say this now which you may find a surprising statement.

Death is not natural. the world was not hardwired in God's created beauty and life to experience decay and death.

I want to linger on this thought. It's very, really important. death is not natural. It is not the way things should be.

Life should not end like this. death is not good. In the first chapter of the book of Genesis God pronounced everything that he had made to be very good.

But death wasn't in that. Death was not covered by that vast sweep of God's blessing as he looked upon the universe that he'd made made and the world that he'd made.

[17:12] There's not a hint of death about it. God's warning about death comes in Genesis chapter 2.

This warning about this unblessed intruder. And then you need to go to Genesis chapter 3 to find that the warning comes to pass that God's judgment does actually happen in this way.

First spiritually to two humans. And then you need to go to Genesis chapter 4 to find the reality of physical death actually occurring in the murder of Abel by Cain.

Significantly emblematically the first human death was not peacefully in someone's sleep but violently and bloodily. Human beings brought death upon themselves by a deliberate act of disobedience against God.

Ignoring God's warning and choosing the devil's lie and receiving God's curse in return. And the world has never shaken off this curse because the world has never lost its addiction to rebellion against God.

[18:38] From birth to death we are discovered to be sinners. The Apostle Paul has centuries of history to build upon when he says this in Romans 3.23 all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That is God's good and just requirement his glory and we all fall short of it. Every single one of us addicted to sin sin.

And your death and my death is just a reflection of that sin nature which still lingers about us and it afflicts the whole world.

Not only the world of human beings but the created world as well. The world that is groaning at this time because of the curse that mankind brought upon the creation.

And again Paul says Romans 6.23 the wages of sin is death. He draws a very straight line between the two. The soul that sins must die.

[20:06] There's a direct connection sin, death, sin, death, sin, death. It's normal.

It's a universal experience but it's not natural. And by that I mean it is not as God originally intended things to be.

And it is not as things will eventually be. because death will be destroyed. There's a sweet little poem that's tacked on to the end of many funeral directors, brochures and people read out of funerals.

It's called Death is Nothing. Have you ever heard that one? Death is Nothing. I'll say it here, it's pathetic. Death is Something.

That poem just says Death is Nothing. It's just a little pin prick of your life. Just a little moment. You go into the next room and you meet your loved ones and so forth.

[21:24] There's nothing about the Bible in that statement. Science can trace with enormous detail how this moment occurs so it appears to be nothing more than the inevitability of being human.

But it was not always so. Death is an intruder. Death is not kindly, it's an enemy.

That's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, 26 the last enemy to be destroyed is death. It's an enemy.

It's not a friend. It's not kindly. It's not gentle. It's not peaceful. It's an enemy. And it will be destroyed.

It's death. And another thing. The presence of the devil.

[22:36] The devil who by his believed lie ushered in this evil of death seems to hover around the subject whenever it manifests itself.

Please turn to Hebrews chapter 2 verse 14. It's also on the screen. But it's good to see it in your Bible.

Hebrews 2 14. 14. Hebrews 14. Hebrews 14. Hebrews 14. Hebrews 14. Hebrews 14. Hebrews 14. Hebrews 14. Hebrews 14. 15.

Since the children have flesh and blood, he, that's Jesus, too, shared in their humanity. That was his deliberate choice. He came from earth to heaven, heaven to earth, to share in our humanity. So that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

[23:44] And I highlight that section here. By his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is the devil. This is a troubling territory, isn't it?

Theologically this is a troubling territory to think about. Bible commentators have wrestled with the highlighted text. What can it mean that the devil in some sense holds the power of death?

It cannot mean that the timing of our death is controlled by the devil. Amen? No, no, that's as much in God's sovereign hands as everything else in your life.

But I think we get a sense of what this might mean from the John 11 passage, and this is why I want to go into that territory. Please go to John 11 verse 33. 33. 33.

33. 33. 33.

[24:55] When Jesus saw her weeping, this was Mary, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled, and troubled, disturbed, shaken up.

Also, please look at verse 36. The Jews said, see how he loved him.

Verse 38. Jesus once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. This translation is not strong enough to express what's going on in this place.

Another translation has it, he groaned in spirit. There's nothing quite like this in the rest of Jesus recorded ministry. Something deep and mysterious is going on.

The Greek here indicates deep anger and indignation. Some have said perhaps he was just indignant over the professional mourning.

[26:12] All the people who come out were they really sorry for what had happened? Were you just seeing hypocrisy at work there? Just a performance? I don't think that's weighty enough to bear the understanding here.

it's an interesting word. It's a word that comes from the snorting of a horse. Can you believe it?

The snorting of a horse. Like a charger. Yeah. man. And as he nears the tomb it's almost as if Jesus on coming near to this place of death full knowing what he's about to do.

It's almost as if he's like God's champion to do battle with the devil. devil who has caused this havoc in the world through his initial lie which was believed and has afflicted us to this very day.

And here is this one scene this one situation of real death taking place. As I say there's almost a sense of the devil and his ways sort of prowling around those final moments gloating over the fulfillment of the very thing which he loves which is destruction isn't it?

[27:42] He loves to rob he's a killer a destroyer and seeing death at work in that way kind of an exhortation on the part of the devil and here comes Jesus like the champion of God to do battle with the devil in just a few days Jesus himself will experience death and he will conquer it this is like a dry run a foretaste of that great day as he comes to confront this terrible thing that we call death and temporarily released because it was temporary Lazarus from the state of death one man from its power on that day and to give fair warning to the devil that the time of his being stripped to power is now coming fast and he says in the very next chapter John chapter 12 verse 31 now is the time for judgment on this world now the prince of the world will be driven out the moment had arrived not at the

Lazarus tomb moment but the moment was going to come where he would say now the time has arrived the prince of this world will be driven out I want to lead you on to a third subject which is found back again in that Hebrews passage and it's the fear of death the fear of death read that passage again since the children of flesh and blood he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death that is the devil and free those who all

their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death that's the honest statement of the word of God held in slavery by their fear of death fear is also not part of God's

Genesis one created order there was no fear in the world that God made and pronounced very good the experience of fear entered the world in Genesis chapter three after Adam and Eve had sinned against God they tried to hide themselves from God and when God called out to Adam he says to God I heard you in the garden and I was afraid he sins and becomes ashamed of himself and afraid of God sin brings death and both are the cause of shame and fear and we should be afraid of death not just because it is unknown a one off experience but because it is so intimately involved with the subjects of sin our sin and God's judgment upon it there is a right and a justified fear of death if you fear something you might do something about it our ancestors knew a lot about this they may have handled the fear badly but they tried to do something about it but we in the western world have devised ways to try to get rid of this fear we will not take time to think about this subject because it is too painful we will not linger here we will busy ourselves with distractions and forbid death to have a place in our thinking until it is too late and worse even at the end we have so sanitized and belittled death that we manage to convince ourselves or at least pretend that death is not to be feared but rather ignored

I make a generalization so many funerals today have nothing to say about death but focus rather on the celebration of past life but as miserable and unwanted as this feeling of fear of death is it is in part God's warning mechanism to get ready for it to ask the difficult questions and not be satisfied until we have the truthful answers and are able to face it rather than to avoid it death is not the end death is not the end the Bible is absolutely clear about this death is not a moment of oblivion forgetfulness sleep nothing

I only part quoted Hebrews 9 27 before just as man is destined to die once in the same way exactly the same way every single one who dies has to face judgment there's a judgment God is making a judgment upon us and it will come and it's a reality and it will happen after we die oh that's the thing not oblivion but judgment God's judgment God's verdict will either be heaven or hell and which will it be for us where there is no second chance or a court of appeal but an eternity of one or the other with equal reality but completely polar opposites without saying more on this subject but I will do so next week please note that the moment of our death is the final moment after which our lives are fixed eternally in perfect happiness or perfect misery death is not the end fourthly let me speak here about

[34:20] Jesus humanity which comes out so clearly in John chapter 11 this passage tells us with a depth and intensity like no other that Jesus the son of God the second person of trinity became a real man he became what he had not been the perfect God also became the perfect man not a superman but a real man but perfect perfect flesh and blood feeling feeling man exactly like us in every way except for sin and even more wonderfully he did all this he humbled himself in this way he lived in the muck and bullets of our world that he had never personally experienced before and he did all this for us he didn't do it to dazzle and amaze us although it does but he does he doesn't come to amaze but to save let's leave it there rather leave it on that slide there that

Hebrews 2 14 passage speaks of Jesus since the children have flesh and blood he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death that is the devil and here's the wonderful thing he comes down from heaven to earth to be for us he is for us on our side with us with us how much closer could our mighty God come to us and Jesus came he doesn't hold back does he he enters fully into the experience of mankind even to such a scene as this he's there for the disciples he's there for

Martha and Mary he's there for the mourners to mourn like no other man he mourned those three verses 33 35 and 38 all tell the same story this is the other side of the coin I spoke earlier about that groaning in spirit that troubled in spirit but the other side of that coin is a real empathy a sympathy a weeping like no other man has ever wept and when that shortest verse in the Bible Jesus wept I want you to understand that he is bathed in tears at that moment he is bathed in tears he is not a professional mourner he is one who is crying over the death of a friend and he's crying alongside Mary and Martha as he sees their grief and pain and he is crying real tears the son of

God is crying real tears in his pain shared pain with these dear friends God's outraged champion is also the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief that's his rather wonderful title acquainted with grief what grief Jesus Christ suffered in his own life he knew about rejection loneliness friendlessness opposition weariness pain pain pain acquainted with grief felt intensely because he's the perfect man so even those around who were full of their cries and the noise he's seen I'm sure had to say see how he loved him see how he loved him this is real there is no one like Jesus Christ who understands death and mourning there is no one you need close to you in your dying like Jesus Christ or in your mourning over another's death death he totally identifies with you he's been there he knows he understands he knows exactly what you're going through because not only does he go through the same life as you and I in the same messed up world with all its confusion but he goes through the process of dying and death not for himself because sin never touched him though he knew all about temptation but for us our sin our curse our judgment he's our substitute and he experiences a full horror of death on our behalf that's why he and he alone can be for us in perfect understanding and sympathy you can't put a wafer's gap between our experience and the ability of the

[40:35] Lord Jesus Christ to understand it and this is one of the stunning reasons why Jesus is unique and supreme name me any other leader king guru philosopher spiritual head who can touch him when I die there is one I must have with me and that is Jesus Christ when I die there is one I want my family and friends to be with and that is Jesus Christ Jesus power and authority but the wonderful understanding of Jesus would in the end amount to nothing if all I had to show at the end of it was God's judgment upon my sin sympathy is a wonderful thing sympathy won't get me past God's judgment and a lost eternity but Jesus did not only come to be with us and even for us but to truly save us to change what would otherwise and inevitably be condemnation for every single one of us to God's forgiveness acceptance adoption into his family and the reality of spending eternity with him his people in a perfectly restored world without death without sin without mourning and without sorrow and he has the power and authority to do this this passage speaks so clearly of

Jesus as the only person who knows what is going on you read it again he's the only person who knows what's happening in this situation he has the answers and he has the power to deliver those answers he does it all no help from anyone around him drowning in their grief and confusion how could it be otherwise we have absolutely nothing to offer we're helpless we're hopeless we're pathetic enslaved in our God rebellion he is the only one who can offer answers in the confusion and helplessness all around him Jesus is the one only person in control of events and their outcome he knows what he is about to do he has already talked to his father in heaven about it all and in perfect harmony he's working out God's purposes this is going to bring glory to God Jesus knows it his timing is perfect there's

Lazarus he's well and truly dead four days in the tomb he's decaying Jesus says take away the stone a command and order from the son of God they take away the stone Jesus calls in a loud voice Lazarus come out he's already been revived he's waiting to come out through the entrance and I love the detail of this he's coming out this sort of mummified body wrapped completely around sort of shuffling out it's a strange sight who would dare to go and actually do what Jesus said take the strips off him whoa the stench the smell I tell you it's gone I tell you it's gone they take the first strip off and there's a perfectly healthy body underneath all that decay is not there any longer the last thing comes off and he's the Lazarus who was laughing and joking with them with a meal last week it's the power of

God isn't it oh yes he's fully alive and Jesus did this it's wonderful it's wonderful but even more wonderful for what it prefigures as just a few days later the sinless saviour is also dead wrapped in cloths even around his head and laid in a cave with a stone covering and after three days Jesus is resurrected no words of authority from outside the tomb no helpers to remove the grave clothes no human assistance to roll the stone away no he did it by himself Jesus himself said in John chapter 10 verses 17 and 18 the reason my father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again no one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord

I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again he predicted this is exactly what would happen on multiple occasions and he did it in concert with the heavenly father total command of his own dying total command of his own resurrection not like Lazarus to die again in just a few months or years but never to die because he lives and reigns now in a glorified body at the right hand of God and he offers a resurrection life he offers that resurrection life first now spiritually and eventually physically to all who will entrust their lives to him I am the resurrection of the life he who believes in me will live even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die Paul said a million times around many gravesides isn't it words trotted off these are most precious powerful extraordinary words of

[46:43] God's offer to us this morning to us dying people this is what Jesus is offering to us offering himself and saying I am the resurrection of the life do you believe this do you believe this that was the question he put to Martha and the brilliant answer she gave to I know you're the Christ the son of God oh what a blessed thing that she was able to accept that in the weakness of her faith but of course millions of people do not accept that but here's the challenge and here's the opportunity here's the invitation this morning because he speaks the word to Martha he's speaking the word here in Calvary church this morning and saying to us all do you believe this to believe that only Jesus can deal with your sin problem because he died for people's sins on the cross at Calvary by taking the punishment that they deserved because of

Jesus God can forgive your sin all your sin can be forgiven do you believe that to believe that Jesus can give you spiritual life without him you're spiritually dead but Jesus can make you spiritually alive a new creation being changed day by day into the person God wants you to be because of Jesus God can give you spiritual life life to believe that Jesus can give you resurrection life beyond the death your death life in a restored resurrected body like Jesus to be with him and his people forever because of Jesus God can give you this solid hope put your life life into the hands of Jesus Christ to do what you cannot do commit yourself to him freely totally and without reservation

I've been a follower of Jesus for 48 years but poorly and too often weakly so stumblingly so I've frittered away a lot of God given time blown hot and cold I know that I'm not alone we're all like that the closeness of death has forced me thank God to want to be utterly clear on where I stand I cannot be in any doubt I need to be deeply serious I need to be clear now I cannot face death unclear and uncertain and nor can you my time might be short but your might be even shorter you don't know what a day will bring you need to sort this with God now before the day of judgment before your dying day you need to be clear and you need to hear God's word to you through Jesus do you believe this because you've got nowhere else to go there is no one else who can do this for you only Jesus can I must have the knowledge of Christ's death and resurrection intimate close a daily reality to be able to say at the end as my good friend John Newton who I'm looking forward to talking to in heavenly places writing his own obituary in a way he says I remember two things very clearly two things very clearly says John Newton I'm a great sinner and Christ is a great saviour facing death is not about a technique please please don't go down that route place facing death is not about a philosophy please don't go down that route it's about a person and that person is

Jesus Christ and that can become your storyline today amen amen amen Amen.