

Jesus Mission death to life

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- [0 : 0 0] Okay, well, death. It's a stark word, isn't it? And bitter experience forces everyone to recognize that stark reality, recognize that awfulness.
- The statistics are brutal. One out of one dies. Now, instinctively, we move away from death, don't we?
- We tend to move away from any notion of death, and we move towards notions of life. In fact, I think if you scratch below the surface, most people develop a way of thinking about death as a necessity which allows enjoyment of life.
- And I think the problem is largely driven by relationships. Parents, children, siblings, friends. We really value relationships.
- We would do anything to maintain relationships, but constantly they're being ripped away from us by death, whether that death comes through illness, accident suddenly, or simple old age.
- [1 : 1 8] There's never a moment where we're ready to give up those relationships into death. We're horrified.
- We're traumatized. We sense that this is not right. We sense that we're made for something better, something more permanent. We long for something better.
- And angrily, sometimes, we wonder why it has to happen and wish something could be done to prevent it. We actually want to defy death, but no, we can't.
- In spite of our efforts to look young or extend our lives, death catches up. And so I think what we do in our society is default to the next best thing.
- We avoid talking about it. And so traditionally, death has been one of those impolite subjects at a dinner party. Even when we have to talk about death, and sometimes we do, we tend to sanitize the notion of death these days in our society.
- [2 : 3 2] We sanitize the reality by saying that someone has passed. When's the last time you heard of somebody dying? People today just pass. I'm not sure where they're passing to, but that's the language.
- It seems to soften it. Funerals are increasingly given over totally to a celebration of the life of the person who's passed. Now, there's nothing wrong with celebrating the life, but somehow these celebrations are now dominating, and there's no time given to consider the stark reality of that body before friends and family.
- And the termination of relationships that's represented in that body before the family and friends. No amount of celebration can really offset that.
- And then again, changing direction slightly, we all want to know how a story ends. We like to watch a movie to the completion. We follow scandals through the newspapers to completion.
- And no less do we desire to know how our own personal story is going to end. And so, in our society, some, perhaps even increasingly so, I think, turn to fortune tellers and mystics.

[3 : 55] Increasingly common also in our society. People just assume a view of what happens after death without really thinking it through. So, you'll hear people commonly talk today about reincarnation.

And I'm thinking, really? Do you know what goes around all that? Or some people will just say, well, after death there's nothingness, there's oblivion. Well, how have you come to that conclusion?

Or people commonly say, well, I'm going to be resurrected and go to heaven because I'm basically a good person, at least better than those people over there. And sometimes even we talk about hell.

We talk about hell in a way that has sort of domesticated it. We're in hell as now a place of fun. And if I end up in hell, well, I'll be there with all my mates. It'll be a romping old party.

But you know what? When you scratch below the surface, in spite of all these strategies to deal with death, so many people still fear it. So many people still fear death.

[5 : 05] Ignoring it doesn't make it go away. Won't hold it at bay. Won't make it any easier when the moment comes. And that, if you need a reason this morning, tune into what the Bible said.

And that is why we need to listen to the words of Jesus in this passage before us. Because the words of Jesus promise a good end to our personal story.

Jesus doesn't avoid the reality of death. He feels it deeply. We'll see that in the passage. But he promises to move us through death to life.

That's his passion. That's his mission. To move people from death to life. He promises life everlasting. The good life that we long for every time we go to a funeral.

The life we since were created for. He promises that to any and all who believe or trust in him. So with that introduction, let's turn to the story.

[6 : 20] One of these stories in which the truth is a sight more strange than fiction. One of these stories in which the truth is a story of Jesus. One of these stories in which the truth is a story of Jesus.

One of these stories in which the truth is a story of Jesus. And if you're a visitor this morning and not familiar with it, the outline of what I'm saying is on the back of that sheet you get given at the front door as you came in this morning or should have been given. So I want to walk through the first part of the story under the heading of words speak louder than actions.

Words speaking louder than actions. And I'm using that heading because I'm hoping it will actually help us avoid tripping up on a couple of real problems in the story early on.

Because there's a couple of really jarring moments in this story as it unfolds. And those jarring moments if we trip on them will cause us to miss the big point of the picture or the big point of the drama altogether.

So here we go. Jesus is in a region called Batanea which is up in the northwest of Palestine. About four days travel from Bethany where these guys live.

[7 : 20] And the story at a big picture level develops really, really slowly over a minimum of six days. Now that slowness I think is pretty incredible given that the story starts with Jesus getting the message that nobody wants to get.

His good friend from a family he was obviously very close to was ill. Now the word there is ill. It doesn't mean he just had a headache or a bit of an upset stomach. It means he was seriously ill.

He was at death's door and deteriorating. And this messenger arrives and the news was already there for four days old when Jesus got it.

And so with the message we get no trouble I think sensing the desperate hope that was attached to that message by the two sisters. They would have known of Jesus' miraculous power intervening and reversing other similar situations.

And so their hope attached to this message was that just perhaps in some I don't know what way Mary and Martha might have thought just maybe Jesus can do something.

[8 : 43] maybe he can intervene in the situation for our brother. Either by coming to him immediately and they know he had done that by crossing the sea of Galilee crossed it immediately it says or healing him from a distance.

Now this is the first stick point Jesus' response into this urgency this tragedy unfolding tragedy he sends the messenger back with another message essentially saying to Mary and Martha knowing that the messenger would take four days to get back to deliver this message don't worry everything will work out alright.

And again it's not hard to imagine Mary and Martha questioning the messenger remember when you look at the time sequence of the story by the time the messenger gets back Lazarus has already been dead for two days and you can just imagine Martha and Mary quizzing the messenger is that it?

Is that all he said? He didn't offer to heal he didn't offer to do anything? But it gets worse even more apparently heartless was Jesus' purposeful delay.

Look at the way verses 5, 6 and 7 are put together. Now Jesus we're just told in verse 5 how much Jesus loved the family. And then look at verse 6 the so in our English versions is therefore it's a very strong word so it reads like this now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus therefore when he heard that Lazarus was ill he did nothing for two days.

[10 : 28] He did nothing for two days. and then verse 7 two days later when he knew that Lazarus was dead then he says to his disciples now let's go to Judea let's go and see Lazarus.

but the disciples then come into the picture and if Jesus is heartless they're insensitive because it would appear that they're off in a different direction altogether because their concern when they hear the word Judea is hang on a minute that's going to be a strategic mistake if we go back there we're as good as dead they're operating on their own agenda of what they think Jesus' mission should have been and for them the idea of death doesn't figure if Jesus is going to lead a revolt against the Roman occupation force Jesus has no use dead go back there you're as good as dead no Jesus we can't do it and verse 9 and 10 then Jesus challenges their agenda again speaking purposefully purposefully rather he says look I'm light and by definition light dispels darkness even more than that

Jesus is saying there that he is the light of God's salvation purpose this is my mission I'm involved in God's salvation purpose so what can go wrong what can go wrong when you're fulfilling God's plan is what Jesus is saying to them but still they persist when Jesus then tells them that Lazarus has fallen asleep they misunderstand it because they're not thinking they're not engaged they're thinking of their own agenda and he sees on that as further reason not to go back to Jerusalem well if Lazarus shone some signs of recovery we don't need to go there and put our lives at risk put the bigger mission at risk and again that prompts another apparently heartless response by Jesus verse 14 Jesus clarifies Jesus said told them plainly Lazarus has died look at what follows and for your sake I am glad

I was not there so that you may believe but let's go to him how could Jesus be glad he wasn't there and yet is now determined to go to him after he's dead friends that's why I use the heading for this first part of the story it's really important we hear Jesus' words rather than getting tripped up by his apparent actions his words are purposefully designed to point to the heart of the story to point towards belief as we're told in verse 14 see the story is not about Lazarus it's about Jesus setting the scene where the death of Lazarus becomes a powerful demonstration of the character purpose and goodness of the father and of

Jesus himself the word glory is used to describe all that and so this whole story is orchestrated and that's a very strong word but it's the word that needs to be used Jesus orchestrates every circumstance here so that they might believe that he is saviour and king and so the way the story unfolds at the end of the first part we are face to face with an indisputable power the power of death life the life of Lazarus succumbs to death Lazarus is dead and Thomas I think speaks for the disciples following through this notion of death and heaviness Thomas speaks for the disciples verse 16 well he says we may as well go with him because we're all as good as dead if we go back to

[15 : 05] Judea there's just a heaviness brooding over this whole story death as it were is coming at them from every which angle and four days later the heaviness continues four days later they finally arrive at the home of Lazarus and they're confronted with a scene of devastation the reality of death dominates there as well the despair the confusion the broken heartedness the pain the anger the grief which comes inevitably with death is all there palpable as Jesus arrives at the family home and in conversation with Martha and then Mary we sense we sense these two girls trying to be restrained trying to keep it together but oozing with hurt and disappointment why didn't you do something

Jesus it was within your power to do something why why why if only man isn't that the questions we ask we're so familiar with those questions at a funeral aren't we we sit beside the bedside of somebody who's dying that's the question isn't it and so John has drawn us brilliantly into an all too familiar yet dreadful scene we've all been there we've all been there sisters brothers wider family parents children friends we've all been there as one of those groups gathered to grieve numb with pain and confusion wrestling in our hearts with the anger it shouldn't be like this the big questions why what if longing that could have been different but at the same time not knowing how and quietly recognizing in a way that we never ever admit to quietly recognizing that the unwelcome visitor who has just turned up again and snatched away ripped away one love deeply by us will one day turn up for us it will be my turn soon all too soon so let's look at the second part of the story where

Jesus' actions speak much louder than his words Jesus walks into this tragic scene dominated by death and despair with words of promise words of promise that overflow with hope comfort and blessing look at verse 23 he pushes Martha to a whole new level of belief Jesus said to her your brother will rise again Martha said to him I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day Jesus said to her I am the resurrection and the life see Martha like most Jews believed there would be a sort of general resurrection sometime in the future at the day of judgment at the end of the world because they believed that God would not allow death to have the final word in the lives of his special people things and the life was to be found in relationship with him and might be known and enjoyed now

Jesus said to Martha Martha I need you to believe in me that I am the one I am Messiah I am the one who can cross the boundaries between life and death this world and the next world, I can cross that boundary and bring back to life any whom I choose to do so, any I choose to give life to. This is my mission. This is my specialty, is what Jesus is asking Matthew to believe. My specialty is moving people from death to life.

I am the source of real life, says Jesus. And wherever I am, I'm so identified with resurrection and life that you can actually say, I am the resurrection. Wherever I am, says Jesus, there will be real life, life that will never end, relationship that will never break or cease to be or be ripped away, life that will always satisfy and never disappoint.

[20 : 21] More than that, if that was possible, more than that, trusting Jesus or being in relationship with him means that though we will actually at some point in the future experience actual physical death and decay, we will never experience a break in relationship with God, but we'll pass through death into heaven and eternal relationship with him. Death won't be the end of our story.

It's a new chapter as the life we have in Jesus now takes on a whole new dimension as the life we have with Jesus in heaven forever. Now look at Martha's response in verse 27. Now we've got to cut the woman a bit of slack. This is pretty big call to come at this sort of stuff. Martha says in verse 27, yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

Now she doesn't quite get there, does she? She's a couple of steps short of what Jesus or where Jesus wanted her to be. Nevertheless, John records this very, very carefully. She doesn't get fully that resurrection life is a present reality to be enjoyed. But here's the goal that John wants us to understand. What she does know is, what she is sure about, is that Jesus is the Christ. That is, that Jesus is God's King and Savior sent into the world to reverse the effects of sin, principle of which is death.

So she doesn't know how it's all going to work. She can't quite get her head around what Jesus sent her, but she knows enough to know that life lies with Jesus. And interestingly also, when you look at the bigger picture, step right back, big picture stuff, John chapter 20 verse 31, John gives us his one reason for writing the whole record, and it's almost identical words to which, to that, to those which he puts in Martha's, Mary or Martha, whoever it was, one of them anyway, one of the sisters, almost identical words to what he puts in her mouth now.

In other words, John's saying, yet she doesn't understand all the details, but she's there. She believes.

[23 : 02] She is a demonstration of that very thing that Jesus has come to achieve. She is entrusting herself in the face of death to Jesus, the face of life.

Then the story moves on, and that was Martha, obviously. Jesus meets Mary then, and once again is confronted by the utter devastation that comes with death.

These girls have been chatting away. They had been having a word or two about Jesus before Jesus arrived, because she leads out with almost identical sentence to Jesus. Jesus, if only you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

So there's a fair bit of conversation that wasn't reported to Jesus there, I would suspect. And in response, Jesus acts in wonderful tenderness and compassion with Mary as he did with Martha.

And you can just see it. He felt their pain, and he identified with them. And verses 33 and 34 then. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

[24 : 20] And he said, where have you laid him? The whole scene, as Jesus observes it, prompts an overflow of incredible emotion on the part of Jesus.

Now, we need to understand these words here, because in the English translation again, it says he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And it suggests that it might have been in response to saying the girl's weeping.

But the language is much, much stronger than that. The word there means, in English, what was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. The word actually is better rendered outraged. Jesus was absolutely outraged at what he saw before him.

So what was Jesus outraged at? Well, I take it he was outraged as he observed the mess caused by sin among God's image bearers.

You remember back at the start of Jesus' ministry, one of the first things he did, he went to the temple. And the same word, he was outraged. He was outraged back then because he saw in the temple, the very place of worship, he saw how sin, how far sin had taken God's people away in their heart from worshipping God.

[25 : 45] So it had just become a den of robbers and thieves. A place to make money. And he was outraged. Sin takes people away from God, into death. Sin messes up the world, messes up lives, and ultimately takes us to death.

And he was outraged. And he's outraged at the end of his ministry because he looks at the unnaturalness of death in God's good creation.

He's outraged at the misery of the human race, the carnage of sin, and the destructive power of Satan, who is the power of death, and whom he had come into this world to defeat and destroy.

His outrage then comes with tears. He weeps. He weeps because of the mess of sin he sees before him.

He weeps because sin means that God's not honoured as he ought to have been honoured by those he made.

[26 : 52] He weeps because in just over a week, he would do battle to defeat Satan, who is the power of death, knowing that that battle would cost him his life.

So he weeps for what's ahead, I believe, as well. So here we have it, as we move to the climax of this miracle.

The final action of the drama unfolds with Jesus standing in front of the tomb of Lazarus, not in a state of inconsolable grief, but driven by absolute outrage at the mess sin causes in God's world.

And with that, we see for the second time in this story, a confrontation with that indisputable power as Jesus moves Lazarus from death to life.

Come back from the dead, Lazarus, now. Come back from death to new life, now.

[28 : 15] And immediately, the stinking, and that's the word, not a polite odour. Man in a 50 degree climate after four days.

Do you want me to describe it to you? Alison begged me not to. Yep, the stinking decomposition that Lazarus had become is reversed.

Totally reversed. Immediately reversed. And Lazarus bunny hops out of the grave, looking a bit stupid in a sense, wrapped in these grave clothes.

He couldn't have walked. And Jesus says, take those things off and let them go. Almost an anticlimactic statement.

Because the climax was the saviour of this world, Jesus Christ, the one who claimed over and over and over again to be God because he had the power that only God could demonstrate.

[29 : 26] And he demonstrated that power, saying, come back across the divide, Lazarus. Come back to life. And even bigger still, and we'll deal with this next week, the second half of verse, chapter 11.

Even bigger still, the scene was just a shadow of what would be repeated in just over a week. Where Jesus would confront the real enemy, Satan, who has the power of death, and defeat him and prove his lordship over everything by himself coming back from the grave.

Remember in chapter 10, Jesus said that, nobody will take my life from me. For the sake of my sheep, as a good shepherd, I will lay down my life. And then I will take it back up again.

But who else but God has the power to come into this world and exit the world and come back into it on his own volition? Only Jesus has the power to deal with sin which inevitably results in death and thereby reverse the curse of death and restore life as it was meant to be to God's image bearers.

That is his mission. He confirms that mission as he prays to his father. He openly says, I'm not praying this because I need to pray. I'm praying this to show you guys that I and the father are absolutely one in this mission of moving people from death to life.

[30 : 56] So John arranges this story as a report of Jesus to do this.

It's one thing for Jesus to have the big words, to promise words of life. But in this part of the story, his actions speak much louder than his words.

He actually delivers life from death in this very public and orchestrated setting. Could anything bring more glory to the Lord?

More honour to the Lord than this? I don't think so. So I'll finish with this question. Same question that Jesus asked Martha.

Do you believe? Do you believe? Surveys of Christians show that I've read, there's probably lots of different ones, but I've read surveys that show 60 plus percent of Christians don't actually believe in the resurrection.

[32 : 08] I'm talking Christians, I'm not talking pagans. So I ask the question again, do you believe? Do you believe? Jesus said he was the good shepherd.

Chapter 10, the good shepherd who pursued his lost and wayward sheep, pursued his sheep right to the point of their being dead in their trespasses and sin.

He calls them back by name. He delivers them into the good life of relationship with God as we were created to enjoy. That's what Jesus said he did. And here he delivers.

My friends, here's the practical application. Jesus is that something we long for when we're confronted with death.

He is that better life we sense we were created for. He offers his life in the midst of coping with dying bodies that fail us constantly and increasingly.

[33 : 16] The big issues of life, what happens when I die, can be sorted now by believing that in Jesus there's forgiveness, new acceptance, new relationship with God and the good life, eternal life, life abundant, life that will go with us, from this life into heaven and eternity in an unbroken continuity.

So again, as we've seen week after week going through John's gospel, the question is this, will you put your hope for the future into building security and longevity into your current life by your own resources?

obsessively even trying to defy age and death and my goodness, our society's given to that now, isn't it? And we in the church just trot along behind society, obsessively trying to defy age and death.

Or will you invest your future in real life, true life, defined by relationship with Jesus, life that will take you across the divide that one day we will all have to cross into a continued life of never-ending enjoyment of Jesus in heaven.

My friends, I just ask you, I beg you, to consider these words. Let me pray. Lord, it's a hot morning, not conducive to concentration.

[35 : 00] Lots of distractions around us and in our own hearts and minds. I pray, Lord, that you might cut through all those things and imprint your word in our hearts. Give us great joy for those who have already committed ourselves to life in Jesus.

And Lord, for those who are here this morning who have not yet done that, break through resistance, Lord, so that they might also choose life.

Amen.