

Confidence in death

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[0 : 0 0] The reading this morning is from John chapter 11 verses 28 to 44. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

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. And he said, Where have you laid him?

They said to him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. So the Jews said, See how he loved him. But some of them said, Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, Take away the stone.

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days. Jesus said to her, Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?

[1 : 4 9] So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me.

But I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, Unbind him and let him go.

Amber, thanks very much indeed for reading. Please, if you have a Bible in front of you, do keep it open. Or if you have the reading on the outline, then that would be helpful to have to hand so that you can follow.

Anyway, the question I want to ask today is, how should we respond to death? Death is all around us, and yet how should we respond to it?

[2 : 5 5] Perhaps it shouldn't really bother us at all. After all, Richard Dawkins tells us that our universe has precisely the properties we should expect. If there is no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

In other words, death is just the way life is, and we better get used to it. Or perhaps we should respond by clinging to some of the usual platitudes that we hear in the face of death.

They've just gone next door, they've gone to a better place, or I'm glad their suffering is over. Really? But how do we know? Surely no adult should be content with that kind of childish blind faith.

Just as any parent is keen to help their child to distinguish between what is true and what is make-believe. So we should do the same.

Or perhaps a stiff upper lip is the best response in the face of death. Denial that hides the pain and hurt. And yet that hardly squares, does it, with the fear and pain that we see around us every day.

[4 : 16] Well, this is the third of our series of talks in John chapter 11. And my aim this morning is simply for us to see that death is a far bigger deal.

It is far more significant than we tend to think it is. We're also going to see how it is that we can trust Jesus in the face of death.

If you've been following these talks, then you'll remember how John chapter 11 begins. Verse 1. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary, and her sister Martha.

And then verse 3. So the sisters sent to Jesus, saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill. We've seen the shock as Jesus delayed, waiting until Lazarus had died before journeying to Bethany.

We've seen the meeting of Martha meeting Jesus on the road as he comes to Bethany, Lazarus' sister Martha. And now it's the turn of the other sister, Mary, as she meets Jesus together with the crowds and mourners and onlookers.

[5 : 31] Have a look again at verses 32 to 37. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

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. And he said, Where have you laid him?

They said to him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. So the Jews said, See how he loved him. But some of them said, Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?

Jesus shows us, firstly, why we should respond to death with indignation. Why we should respond to death with indignation. Because I think here is the question.

Have a look again at verse 35. Why does Jesus weep? Well, no doubt in part it reveals his humanity. Just as we see elsewhere in the gospel accounts that Jesus could hunger, thirst, eat, drink, walk, sleep, groan and get tired.

[6 : 47] So too, he weeps. Yes, Jesus Christ was fully God on earth. And yet he was also fully human, sharing in our humanity.

The Christian author, John Stott, used to describe how he visited on several occasions Buddhist temples in Southeast Asia.

How he would stand respectfully in front of the statue of the Buddha with its legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed. The ghost of the ghost of the ghost of the ghost of the ghost of Christ.

A remote look on its face, detached from all the agonies of the world. And how on each occasion he had to turn aside. And instead to think of Jesus Christ.

Who stood not above suffering. But instead entered our world. Of flesh and blood. Tears and death.

[7 : 45] Jesus Christ the one who can sympathize with us in our weaknesses and that in itself will be great comfort to many in the face of death but I think this is the question are they simply fake tears just think for a moment how easily these tears could have been spared if only Jesus had gone to Lazarus when he was ill rather than waiting till he had died these tears would have been spared no one would be crying what's more Lazarus Jesus knows that Lazarus is going to rise again why doesn't he just say don't worry there's no big deal there's no reason to be upset perhaps in the same way that a parent might say to a toddler who running around the playground falls over its knee is grazed there's blood dripping don't worry we'll put a plaster on it everything will be fine so notice therefore that it's not simply that Jesus wept verse 33 it's that he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled and again in verse 38 he is deeply moved that word literally means he is outraged not because Jesus has lost his friend Lazarus but outraged by death itself now you and I will only see the significance of that in the context of the whole bible because death is not an accident in the world view of the whole bible death is the result of human sin it is the result of our rebellion against God the rebellion that is in the heart of each one of us the rebellion that says to God I will live my life my way on my own terms so if you have a bible I'd be grateful if you would turn back to the first book of the bible to

Genesis to see this to Genesis chapters 2 and 3 God put Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden it's full of his kind generous and good provision in chapter 2 verses 16 and 17 we're told and the Lord God commanded the man saying you may surely eat of every tree of every tree of the garden but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die so then what is at the heart of sin well it is doubting God's word as the serpent says to the woman in chapter 3 verse 1 did God actually say that you shall not eat any tree in the garden and if we stop to think about it that is how we all naturally live isn't it we we ignore God we decide that we'll be the ones who decide what is right and what is and what is wrong we live life on our own terms despite living in God's world and that rejection of God is then repeated in verse 4 as the serpent says you will not surely die and therefore you see as they eat the fruit it is a declaration that they will run their lives their own way without God and the punishment is death just as God said it would be in fact flick on to Genesis chapter 5 where we are given the first ever family tree and the point is that Adam and each of his descendants all died verse 5 thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years and he died verse 8 thus all the days of Seth were 912 years and he died verse 11 thus all the days of Enosh were 905 years and he died verse 14 thus all the days of Kenan were 910 years and he died verse 17 thus all the days of Mahalalel were 895 years and he died verse 20 thus all the days of Jared were 962 years and he died

Genesis shows us that death is a consequence of sin it is part of God's judgment and it's this therefore that explains why it is that Jesus is so outraged in the face of death just listen to the Christian writer Don Carson describing death in this way we are sinners and we will die every time there is death it still hurts it is painful it is still ugly and it is still the result of sin this was not the way God made the creation in the first place Jesus is outraged by the whole thing he is outraged by the death that has called forth this loss by the sin that lies behind it in other words death is not normal when you look at it from the vantage point of the creation that God made in the first place it is an enemy it is ugly it destroys relationships it is to be feared now let's address then some of those attitudes to death that we thought about at the very beginning is there something which we should just get used to as Richard Dawkins suggests should we simply be content with some of those woolly platitudes they've gone to a better place they're now at peace or adopt a stiff upper lip maybe that's the answer no the Bible is more brutally realistic it dares to recognize that death is indeed the last enemy it is terrible it is right to be indignant in the face of it the idea that death is natural or that in some sense is possible to die well to die a good death is nonsense and yet wonderfully death needn't have the last word yes Jesus shows us why we should respond to death with indignation but secondly he also shows us how we can respond to death with confidence and that's verses 38 to 44 now I want us to spend some time on these verses because the miracles of Jesus Christ are well documented in the New Testament and yet it's so easy either not really to take them seriously or to fail to see their significance for some of course

Jesus' miracles are mere conjuring tricks while others perhaps in their arrogance imagine how easily gullible first century people would have been fooled and no doubt believe that if Jesus came to London today then no one would be taken in after all miracles can't happen so notice will you first of all that Lazarus was really dead verses 38 to 39 then Jesus deeply moved again came to the tomb it was a cave and a stone lay against it Jesus said take away the stone Martha the sister of the dead man said to him Lord by this time there will be an odour for he has been dead four days Jesus said to her did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God Lazarus was really dead he's been in the dead four days already decomposition would have already set in in a hot climate that the stench the smell would have been terrible which means the raising of Lazarus was not simply resuscitation in the first century people had much more of a day-to-day connection with death he was much more familiar to them they didn't shunt people off into care homes and hospitals we mustn't dismiss this account as those of pre-scientific gullible people who would believe in anything but notice Lazarus was not only really dead he was also really raised verse 43 when he had said these things he cried out with a loud voice

Lazarus come out now just imagine for a moment being at that funeral standing outside that tomb and hearing these words of Jesus how embarrassing it must have felt to hear these those words who does Jesus think he is getting people's hopes up like that after all if Jesus hadn't then raised Lazarus imagine what would have happened next perhaps one or two sniggers in the crowd someone says try again Jesus someone else says shout louder Jesus he can't hear you and then the anger as someone else says what a terrible cruel trick on a grieving family now if Jesus hadn't raised Lazarus we would know about it

[18:15] Jesus the con man Jesus the cruel fake but what happens instead verse 44 the man who had died came out his hands and feet bound with linen strips and his face wrapped with the cloth Jesus said to them unbind him and let him go only the only the blinkered or the prejudiced can dismiss the overwhelming evidence for this miracle and notice in the next verse in verse 45 just how very public this was many of the Jews therefore who had come with Mary and had seen what he did believed in him while later on in John chapter 12 the opponents of Jesus plot to kill Lazarus because there's nothing else they can do if Jesus hadn't raised

Lazarus they could find his body they could dig it out of a tomb they could parade his body through the streets and everyone would know what a con man Jesus is but Lazarus is alive and therefore in desperation the only answer is to kill him in October 2019 the Kenyan marathon runner Elliot Kipchoge became the first person ever to run a marathon in under two hours he covered the 26.2 mile distance in a once inconceivable one hour 59 minutes and 40 seconds during a specially tailored event in Vienna now how might I try and persuade a skeptic that he had actually pulled that thing off well I guess I could explain how long it takes me to do a park run and then by kind of process of extrapolation try and work out how long it might take a professional marathon runner to run a record marathon that would certainly be a leap of faith but surely much more persuasive would be to show them the evidence to show them the film footage of what had actually taken place you see one of the myths about faith is that faith is what we have to resort to when there's no evidence we talk don't we about a leap of faith in fact

I've lost count I think of the number of people who have genuinely asked me how can you bring yourself to make this leap of faith and yet in the bible faith is always on the basis of reasoned evidence and that is precisely what we see here in John chapter 11 Lazarus was really dead Lazarus was really raised to life and then in verses 40 to 42 we see the explanation how this is possible verse 40 Jesus said to her did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God so they took away the stone and Jesus lifted up his eyes and said father I thank you that you have heard me I knew that you always hear me but I said this on account of the people standing around that they may believe that you sent me here you see is

Jesus Christ God the son in perfect relationship with God the father the one who has come from God the one who speaks the very words of God the one who does the very works of God whose words and actions you put them together they reveal God perfectly so then what are the implications well firstly if Jesus Christ can raise the dead there is no reason to doubt any of the other miracles he can give sight to the blind he can give the mute their voice the deaf their hearing the lame the use of their legs if he is lord of death then surely he can calm a stall he can miraculously feed 5,000 people now it may well be that you're listening to this and you are someone who frankly finds the miracle accounts in the gospels unbelievable and yet of course if Jesus

Christ really is God come to earth then we shouldn't be surprised when we see the creator overturning and directing demonstrating his complete control over his creation he commands a storm it stops he commands death and it's reversed but secondly this anticipates Jesus' own resurrection from the dead don't turn to it now but you can look it up later later in John chapter 20 both Jesus and Lazarus were placed in tombs with stones across the entrance their bodies embalmed with cloths in order to keep the stench away we're told that when Jesus' disciples come to his tomb the stone has been rolled away already but what is the critical piece of evidence that John draws our attention to well it's the linen cloths lying there folded up the grave clothes set to one side the point being you see that

[24 : 20] Lazarus having come back from death he walks out of the grave wearing his because he will need them again when he dies 30-40 years time as an old man whereas Jesus he doesn't simply come back from death no he goes through death and beyond and out the other side and therefore he will never need them again you see if Jesus rose from the dead never to die again it cannot simply be something that is moderately significant either he didn't in which case you and I can completely dismiss it Christianity is based on a fraud or it did in which case it changes everything forever Jesus is alive today he is indeed Lord and God but then the third implication because the raising of

Lazarus anticipates the raising to life after death of all those who have put their trust in Jesus in other words this is far more significant than simply one man being raised back to life again perhaps to enjoy another 30 years of life or whatever it is now it is an open symbol of Jesus conquest of death and hell when Elliot Kipchoge ran that Vienna marathon in under two hours he gave a press conference afterwards and he said this now I've done it I'm expecting more people to do it after me now it's very similar to what the Lord Jesus could have said after raising Lazarus there are going to be many many more because you see the miracle authenticates the claim that we saw

Jesus makes in chapter 11 verses 25 and 26 we looked at those verses last week just have a look at them again I am the resurrection and the life whoever believes in me though he die yet shall he live now how do we know Jesus isn't bluffing well because he raised Lazarus because Jesus himself was raised from the grave never to die again in other words the raising of Lazarus to life in this world is a visual aid of what will happen to everyone who has put their trust in Jesus as he raises them to life in the next world now I take it that for those who have died in recent weeks trusting in Jesus Christ I take it that for all of us as we face death those of us who are trusting in Jesus

Christ it means we can indeed have great confidence in the face of death confidence not in ourselves but confidence in him let me lead us in prayer Lazarus come out the man who had died came out his hands and feet bound with linen strips his face wrapped with a cloth heavenly father we thank you very much for the way which the Lord Jesus shows us we should regard death both with indignation as we see that it's far greater far more significant simply than biological decay and yet also how wonderfully we can be confident in Jesus Christ those who trust in him of life beyond the grave resurrection life and we pray heavenly father please would you help each one of us to take

Jesus words to heart and to grow in trust of him and we ask it in his name amen you