

(3) The means of life

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is taken from John chapter 11, starting at verse 45 and reading through to verse 54. That's John chapter 11, verse 45, on page 1083.

Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, You know nothing at all, nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

[1 : 17] So from that day on, they made plans to put him to death. Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.

Well do please keep your Bibles open, that's John chapter 11, and you'll see there's an outline on the back of the service sheet to follow as well.

Well this is the third and last series of talks looking at John chapters 11 and 12 after Easter, and today we're going to see precisely how it is that Jesus Christ can offer life after death.

And if you've been following the series, you'll know that is the kind of big claim, if you like, of chapter 11 that we've looked at so far. It's there in verses 25 to 26 which we looked at last week, as Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.

And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. And we've seen over the last two weeks that when Jesus makes that claim, he is not talking hot air.

[2 : 33] We've seen, haven't we, all the evidence we need, as Jesus raises to life Lazarus, who has been dead for four days, whose body is rotting and smelly, and he is raised to life.

Have a look at verse 43. When Jesus 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. And we've seen that, as such, these words of Jesus to the dead Lazarus, as he is raised to life, anticipate the words of Jesus on the final day to all those who trust in him, as he raises them to new life in the next world.

But of course it does beg the question, well how is that possible? And that is the question which this next section of John chapter 11 answers. Because as John writes, he wants us to be absolutely certain for ourselves that we have this life with God, both in this world and the next, that John talks about.

However, as I said last week, I think it's easy for us to have a kind of, a rather sort of vague hope in heaven, but never to be really certain about it for ourselves. Perhaps to speak of heaven, in the same way that we might say, well, you know, I hope the sun's going to shine today, or if we work in the city, I hope the markets will gain 10% in the next, whatever it is, months, or that they won't fall 10% or whatever.

[4 : 18] But of course that kind of thinking is no more than wishful thinking, is it? And I think even as Christians perhaps, when we're faced with the reality of death, the fact that there could actually be life beyond the grave, can often seem a very long shot indeed.

So it's a great thing, wasn't it, just now to be able to pray for the prices. Well, the good news this morning is that God wants us to be certain, and the key to being certain is to understand why it is that Jesus died.

Have a look again, will you, at verses 50 and 51. Nor do you understand, says Caiaphas, that it is better for the people, sorry, that it's better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

He didn't say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the whole nation. Now, John deliberately puts this prediction of Jesus' death bang in the middle of the story about Lazarus.

So you see, all the way up to verse 44, the focus has been on Lazarus, and then next week, we'll see that the focus continues to be Lazarus as we see Jesus at a dinner party given in his honour as a sort of thank you, so to speak, for raising Lazarus from the dead.

[5 : 41] But then in the middle, John deliberately places this prediction of Jesus' death to show us how it is that Jesus offers resurrection life that he's been talking about.

So that's where we're focusing this morning, and you'll see on the outline there are two points. First of all, Jesus' death and the plotting of men. Now, in verses 45 and 46, some of those who saw Jesus raise Lazarus, they tell the Pharisees, the Jewish religious authorities.

Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Now, as a result of that, a meeting is called, a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

They are the governing Jewish body working under Roman occupation. And John provides for us the minutes of that meeting. Have a look at them, verse 47.

What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.

[6 : 57] Now, do you notice that even though they would love to deny that the miracle has taken place, even though they'd love to say, well, you know, this raising of Lazarus, it didn't really happen, that is the one thing, of course, they cannot do.

They cannot deny that Lazarus has been raised to life. Which is a sobering thought, isn't it, for the cynic today, those who perhaps pride themselves on thinking to themselves, well, of course, if I'd been there in the first century, I'd never have fallen for any of these miracles.

I'd never have been quite that gullible. Well, here we see there were cynics in the first century, and the minutes of this meeting of the Sanhedrin show that they would have loved to have been able to disprove Jesus' miracles, but that is the one thing they simply cannot do, because to do so, would totally fly in the face of the facts.

And therefore, of course, it kills off any idea that we might have that miracles by themselves will bring people to put their trust in Jesus. when I was a student back in the 1700s, there was a book that was written, which was published, and it was called Power Evangelism.

It was very influential in the 1980s at the time, and its basic argument was that if only we saw the same sorts of miracles today that we see in the New Testament, then people would come to believe in Jesus.

[8 : 29] Well, here is what we might call the greatest of Jesus' miracles, short of his own resurrection. No one can deny that Lazarus is now alive, but instead of believing in Jesus, what does the establishment do?

They are plotting to kill him. J.C. Ryle, the former bishop of Liverpool, comments on this passage, to fancy as some do that if they saw something wonderful done before their eyes in confirmation of the gospel, they would at once cast off all indecision and serve Christ is a mere idle dream.

He goes on to add, man's unbelief is a far more deeply seated disease than is generally reckoned. It is proof against the logic of facts against reasoning, against arguments.

And do you notice, what is it the establishments are so afraid of? Well, it's there in verse 48, they fear that loads of people will follow Jesus, they fear the civil unrest which will result, they fear the Roman authorities will start to panic and there will be a crackdown.

They fear for their place, verse 48, in other words the temple, and for the nation, the semi-autonomous power that they have within the Roman Empire.

[9 : 58] They're worried about maintaining their status quo, their standing in society, and about the religious ceremonial of the temple. Now, the authentic Jesus has always been an inconvenience to the establishment like that.

I remember some time ago, I belonged to a church which did some interviews on Wimbledon Common one Saturday morning, and as we wandered across Wimbledon Common, we asked people what they thought of Jesus, who they thought Jesus was.

One man described him as a religious freedom fighter who stood up against the Roman Empire for the right to hold your own beliefs. A student described him as an idealistic wandering teacher spreading a message of love and peace.

Someone else described him as a charismatic personality with extraordinary gifts of healing. Someone else described him as what you might call a glorified social worker. Now, that is the sort of Jesus that people like to imagine.

A Jesus who fits in with their own agenda and who doesn't upset the status quo. But, of course, you don't need to read John's gospel or any gospel for that matter to discover that Jesus Christ, the authentic Jesus Christ, is quite unlike that, which is why the authorities here are so rattled.

[11 : 18] And it's so often the case through history that the religious establishment, sadly, is more concerned with the status quo, with maintaining ancient buildings, with the place of the church within the nation and so on, concerned only for their own power and prestige.

It's why authentic Christianity is so often despised by those who are outwardly very religious. It's why if you've been reading the papers in the last couple of weeks, you'll know that the bishops of the Church of England are rattled by the government's latest constitutional proposals, their changes, because they realise that their own power and influence will be undermined.

Well, Caiaphas, the high priest, has a solution. Look at verse 49. One of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, you know nothing at all, nor do you understand that it's better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

In other words, let's quietly do away with Jesus and get on with our lives in peace and quiet. And we're told in verse 53 that from that day on, they plot to take Jesus life.

Now let me say that if that is our view of Jesus' death as a politically expedient murder, and that is frequently what is certainly expounded on television, then we'll always fail to grasp the connection between the death of Jesus and the promise of resurrection life.

[13 : 01] In one of those interviews on Wimbledon Common, I very clearly remember one man was asked what he thought about the death of Jesus, his reply, such a tragedy in the prime of life.

He said, such a tragedy just as people were getting to know him and to listen to his message, such a tragedy in the prime of life. And if that is how we view Jesus' death, we'll never grasp how it is that he can offer resurrection life.

So to help us with that, let's move on to our second point, Jesus' death and the planning of God. Because here we see so very clearly that Jesus' death is far more than an act of political expediency.

Have a look at verse 51 where we are told, he didn't say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

Now you see, this is why John is so anxious to record for us the minutes of this meeting of the Sanhedrin, because behind the plotting of men stands the planning of God.

[14 : 24] God had a purpose for Jesus' death. And in verses 51 to 52, we see the explanation from God himself as to why Jesus died as Caiaphas acts unwittingly as God's mouthpiece.

It speaks, doesn't it, on its own of the awesome power of God, that in the very words that Caiaphas uses to plot the death of Jesus, why God is using those words to proclaim to those who have the ears to hear why it is that Jesus died.

Well, it's one of the clearest explanations in John's gospel of what Jesus' death accomplished. It's an explanation in two parts. First of all, in the death of Jesus, death is defeated.

Now, that word die in verse 50 sums up the big Bible idea that we thought about two weeks ago, that all of us willfully reject God and rebel against him.

The result of that, as we saw two weeks ago, is that we are all by nature under God's wrath, under God's judgments, and deserving of hell. So then, why does Jesus die?

[15 : 36] Well, it's so that we won't perish, so that we needn't die, so that we needn't be separated from God in that sense, and face an eternity in hell. And of course, Lazarus is the wonderful visual aid, isn't he, of that reality.

Just as he is brought back to physical life in this world, so he is a visual aid for us of someone who is rescued from perishing and brought to eternal life.

In the death of Jesus, death is defeated. But then secondly, in the death of Jesus, life is secured.

The key word here is the little word for, or F-O-R, that comes four times in verses 50 to 52. It literally means, on behalf of.

It's one of John's favorite words actually to describe the death of Jesus. It speaks of the language of sacrifice and of substitution, dying on behalf of, in the place of others.

[16 : 45] In fact, his language which echoes the language of the temple. Those of us who have been on the Bible overview course in our study groups this year will know that in the Old Testament the principle is established that an animal could stand in the place of the people and be killed in their place and that God's judgment would fall on the animal rather than the people.

Why don't we just turn to Leviticus chapter 16 just as a reminder of that page 114. Keep a finger in John chapter 11 and turn back to page 114.

Leviticus chapter 16 verses 15 to 17 page 114.

Now here are some of the regulations for the sacrificial system and just see how this principle of substitution and sacrifice is so firmly established. Leviticus 16 verse 15.

Then the priest shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat.

[18 : 02] Thus he shall make atonement for the holy place because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.

No one may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the holy place until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel.

Now I wonder if you can get the point there that Leviticus establishes the principle of substitution and sacrifice and animal dies bearing the punishments that the people deserve and so they are forgiven.

However, Leviticus doesn't just establish the principle, it also looks forward to the perfect sacrifice, to the death of Jesus himself, which brings us back to our verse in John chapter 11, verse 51.

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

[19 : 19] Jesus will die as a substitute and as a sacrifice, fulfilling everything that all those Old Testament sacrifices pointed towards. Jesus. And of course, that point is made even more powerfully, isn't it, in the context of Lazarus.

As Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Jesus is the resurrection, the one who has been raised to life, the one who is the judge on the final day.

Why, it's this Jesus who comes down and takes the punishment we deserve in our place, dying instead of his people.

Now those of you who have been to St. Botolph's Aldersgate, where I'm also a minister, will know that what used to be the church graveyard has been transformed into the most beautiful park, postman's park, in the heart of the city.

It's a favourite with city workers in the summer having their lunch there outside, a favourite with the tour guides, who offer walking tours around the square mile, not least because of the Watts Memorial, which is a 50 foot long memorial, almost the kind of length of this building, commemorating the lives of people who have died to save others.

[20 : 44] Now when I was looking at this passage, preparing it a couple of weeks ago, I went out and had a look at the Watts Memorial and some of the names on that memorial. This is what three of them read.

Mary Rogers, stewardess of the Stella, March the 30th, 1899, self-sacrificed by giving up her life belt and voluntarily going down in the sinking ship.

Edmund Emery, of 272 Kings Road, Chelsea, passenger, leapt from the Thames steamboat to rescue a child and was drowned, 31st of July, 1874.

Thomas Griffin, labourer, April the 12th, 1899, in a boiler explosion at a Battersea sugar refinery, was faithfully scolded as he returns for his mate.

well, it's extraordinary, isn't it, when we read of men and women giving their lives for the sake of others like that, often for the sake of those they didn't know.

[21 : 56] But how much more wonderful that Jesus Christ, indeed the one who is the judge on the final day, has come to lay down his life on behalf of us, so that we, those who trust in him, might be forgiven.

And of course, that explains the claim that is at the very heart of this chapter, how it's possible that Jesus can raise the spiritually dead on the final day.

As Jesus claims, verse 25, I am the resurrection, the life, whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. So I want to finish by applying this teaching to us.

And first of all, I hope we can see the wonderful assurance this passage is for all of us who have put our trust in Jesus. It explains, you see, why that friend of ours, who I mentioned last week, dying of cancer at the age of 30, was able to say in her final hours, I just want to be there.

because she knew that Jesus Christ had died on her behalf. She had already put her trust in him. She had already in this life begun to experience the life with God that Jesus talks about.

[23 : 19] And so she was confident, because Jesus had died, of being raised to resurrection life in the next life. There's great assurance here for the dying Christian.

as we remember that Jesus has died on our behalf. You see, we can look to Lazarus, can't we, with great hope. He is a visual aid of what will happen after death, as Jesus says to each one who has put their trust in Christ, come out of death and be raised to new life.

There's great assurance, too, for the new Christian, who's perhaps thinking, well, can I really be certain that I'm forgiven? Can I really be sure that I've begun a living relationship with the living God?

Can I really be confident that I'll be raised to life after death? Well, yes. Because it depends not upon what you have done or what you feel, but on the death of Jesus on your behalf.

There's great assurance, too, for the discouraged Christian. Perhaps life is hard work. Perhaps at work we feel we're the only Christian around. Perhaps at home life is difficult as a Christian.

[24 : 43] Perhaps at times we're tempted to feel let down by Jesus in some way. Perhaps at other times we wonder, as we look at the circumstances of our lives, we find ourselves asking, well, does he really love me?

Is he really committed to me? Well, here is the reminder that Jesus Christ has died on our behalf. And there's great assurance, too, for those of us who have been following Jesus for years and years, that actually in the long haul of the Christian life, he cares for us, and the promises he makes supremely, the promise of resurrection life after death, still stands.

Well, of course, for those of us who are not yet followers of Jesus, I hope we can see the great encouragement to begin to follow him and to believe in him.

But also, of course, the warning if we don't. The encouragement, because there is no more attractive thing than to follow Jesus, the one who has died on our behalf, the one who promises life with God now, the one who promises resurrection life beyond the grave.

There is no more attractive life than that. That's how we started our service this morning, isn't it? Thinking of the attractive life, the good life of Psalm 1. But also, of course, there is the warning, isn't there, from John 11, that if we reject Jesus, then we are rejecting life.

[26 : 15] Life with God now, and resurrection life beyond the grave. Well, why don't we spend a few moments in quiet, I will then pray, and then as usual, there will be time for questions if anyone has a question.

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.

Heavenly Father, we praise you that the death of Jesus was not a terrible mistake or an accident. thank you, Heavenly Father, that it was your will that he died, and that through his death, death is defeated, and eternal life, resurrection life, is secured.

Thank you, Heavenly Father, that you want us to grasp these things and to understand them clearly. Thank you for the great confidence it gives us, those who have put our trust in Jesus already. thank you that it shows what is at stake in our decision about Jesus.

And we do pray, Heavenly Father, that we would be those who are confident in his work, confident in what his death accomplished, confident in the future as a result.

[27 : 49] And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.