

(1) Life now – and then

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[0 : 00] The reading is taken from the Gospel of John, chapter 11, starting at verse 1, which starts on page 1081. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill. But when Jesus heard it, he said, This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, Let us go to Judea again. The disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?

[1 : 17] Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world.

But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him. After saying these things, he said to them, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.

The disciples said to him, Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover. Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.

Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.

But let us go to him. So Thomas, called the twin, said to his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

[2 : 23] Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.

So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha said to him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

Jesus said to her, 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. Do you believe this? She said to him, Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

[3 : 41] John, thanks very much for reading to us. Let me add my welcome to you. It's very good to see you here this Sunday morning.

Well, before we look at John chapter 11, why don't we pray together? Heavenly Father, thank you for this wonderful truth we've been thinking about this morning, that Jesus is the light of the world, that he reveals your character to us.

And we pray, therefore, that as we look at John 11 together, that we would hear your voice, we would hear you speaking, and we pray that you would transform us, both in the way in which we think and live.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, do keep John chapter 11 open. It's on page 1081 if you've closed the Bibles.

And over the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at John 11 and 12, starting obviously with John 11, where Jesus brings Lazarus back to life. And I think it's a particularly appropriate chapter

for us to be looking at after Easter, because in so doing, Jesus proclaims that he is the one who has defeated death, and therefore that those who belong to him will see life after death themselves. [5 : 01] Now, I'm conscious that to many of us here today, death will seem a million miles away. Many of us are, well, actually, originally I thought of saying young, but I think I'll say relatively young.

We have our lives mapped out. The world is our oyster. And death, I guess for many, seems rather irrelevant. However, the reality of death is, of course, man's greatest enemy. It makes our lives futile. For all of us, death is very final. And, of course, there will be others here this morning who are only too aware of that reality. And while perhaps all of us are able to joke about death and brush it aside at times, like Woody Allen, who quipped that dying is one of the few things that can be done just as easily lying down, nonetheless, who wouldn't agree with him when he said, I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying. Because surely the truth is that all of us have at some stage experienced the fear of death.

Even if perhaps for some of us we imagine it will be a good number of years before we actually have to experience it for ourselves. It was the Duke of Wellington who said that a person must either be a coward or a liar who can boast of never having felt a fear of death.

[6 : 32] And so the claim, therefore, that Jesus has defeated death and overcome death is a wonderful claim for us to be looking at over the next few weeks. But I wonder if you noticed the real shock in that reading from John chapter 11 as Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was dying.

You see, have a look again at verse 3. Lazarus' sisters send word to Jesus. Verse 3. Lord, he whom you love is ill.

And what does Jesus do? Does he drop everything and rush off and go and see him immediately? No. Look over the page. Verse 6.

So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. It's rather extraordinary, isn't it? In fact, I remember a teacher at school who was a confirmed atheist saying that this demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt the callousness of Jesus.

Because he was allowing a man to go through the agony of death twice. Once here, and then later on when he was run over by a bus or whatever it was. However, that doesn't quite make sense, does it?

[7 : 50] Because John is at pains to show us how much Jesus loved Lazarus. So verse 5. Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. In fact, verse 6 begins, So.

In other words, it is precisely because of Jesus' love for Lazarus and his two sisters that he delays. And the delay guarantees that by the time Jesus reaches him, Lazarus has been dead for four days.

So we're bound to ask, aren't we, what's going on? Well, I'm sure for all of us, if we heard that someone we loved was seriously ill, I'm sure we'd drop everything and go and see them.

We'd do, wouldn't we, all we could. But Jesus delays. What could be more important than the healing someone who otherwise will die?

Well, Jesus tells us why he delays. It is because of what Jesus will achieve by raising Lazarus to life.

[8 : 59] Notice, first of all, will you, the reason for Lazarus' death. It's there in verse 4. What are we told? This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

In other words, this whole chapter, as we see Lazarus being raised to life, is for God's glory. It will show us something of what God is like as we see the actions of Jesus and as we hear the words of Jesus.

It's why you probably noticed, as the passage was read to us, Jesus refers to himself in passing as the light, because he's the one who reveals God's character to us.

And so as we see Jesus in this chapter dealing with Lazarus, it will show us precisely what God is like and how glorious he is in the face of death.

So that's one reason for the delay. But the second reason for the delay is in verses 14 and 15. Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.

[10:11] In other words, this is an act of love to help people believe in Jesus. Now for some of us here today, as we see Jesus dealing with Lazarus, I guess it will reinforce what we believe already about Jesus.

But I hope that for others it will profoundly challenge us as we ask whether our understanding of Jesus measures up to the authentic Jesus of history that we see here in John's Gospel.

And we see in these verses which we're looking at today, in verses 1 to 16, two things about Jesus that John wants us to believe. The first is that Jesus Christ overcomes the power of death.

Jesus Christ overcomes the power of death. You see, have a look again, will you, at verse 3. Lord, he whom you love is ill.

It's very striking that, isn't it, that Mary and Martha assume that here Jesus can do something about Lazarus' illness. In fact, later on they say even more.

[11:21] Verse 21, Martha says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And Mary says exactly the same thing in verse 32. Now those statements alone speak wonders for Jesus, don't they?

They show that the miracles of Jesus weren't sort of one-offs. When he cured the sick, it wasn't because he was having a lucky day and because the wind was blowing in the right direction. No, Jesus was known as a healer.

In fact, there were times when he had to withdraw from the crowds because he was being swamped by requests for healing. And it speaks volumes, too, that these people think that Jesus can heal a dying man.

You see, look at verse 37, where the crowd say to Jesus, could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man, which we see in John chapter 9, also have kept this man from dying.

Here is Lazarus. He's got much more wrong with him as he's needed a broken toe. He is dying. And those of us who have watched someone dying will know how very hopeless those last few hours look.

[12:33] Yet people assumed Jesus could have healed him. An extraordinary man. But clearly what we see in this chapter is that Jesus is not simply a kind of super doctor because he is so much more than that.

He is the one who can raise the dead, who overcomes the power of death. And surely that is why Jesus waits for Lazarus to die.

It is so that we learn the lesson not simply that Jesus can heal the sick and prevent them from dying. So we will learn the lesson that Jesus can raise the dead.

That for Jesus, death is simply sleep. Did you notice what he said in verse 11? Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.

Now clearly there, Jesus means that Lazarus has died. We see his disciples are a bit slow off the mark. They think Jesus means literal sleep. So they say, don't they, verse 12, Lord, if he's fallen asleep, he will recover.

[13:43] And John comments in verse 13. Now Jesus has spoken of his death, but they thought he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died, and for your sake, I'm glad I was not there so that you may believe.

Why is Jesus glad that Lazarus has died? It is so that we will learn the lesson that for Jesus, death is simply sleep.

And we see how easy it is for Jesus to raise the dead in verse 43. Have a look at verse 43 with me. When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

The man who had died came out of the tomb, 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.

You see, it's easier for Jesus to raise the dead than it is for me to wake up my children when they're fast asleep on a Saturday morning.

[14:57] It's rather hard to imagine, isn't it? If you've seen a dead person, totally lifeless, grey, motionless. I remember going to see my grandmother after she had died.

It never occurred to me to try and bring her back to life. It just seemed rather absurd to try and do that. Forty years ago, a chemistry teacher from Michigan in the States wrote a book, *The Prospect of Immortality*.

In that book, he claimed that you could cheat death by freezing a dead body, waiting, and then reanimating it. The book led to the modern cryonics movement, and if you want to have your body

frozen when you die, hoping that one day science will have kind of progressed far enough for you to be brought back to life again, I'm told in the States it will cost you \$125,000.

Alternatively, I'm told you can simply have your head frozen for \$50,000, although, of course, this assumes that not only will they be able to reanimate your head, but also attach it to a body as well. It's extraordinary, isn't it, the length people will go to to try and cheat death, despite all our scientific advances. We cannot do it. yet consider Lazarus, his body is decomposing.

[16:15] Verse 39, Martha says, by this time there will be an odor, for he's been dead for four days. The smell is dreadful. Back in verse 17, John deliberately tells us it's four days after the death of Jesus, after the death of Lazarus, that Jesus gets to the tomb, quite possibly because of the Jewish belief that death was irreversible after three days.

Jesus waits, you see, so no one can think that his actions are simply resuscitation. And isn't that not amazing when Jesus says to Lazarus, come out, as he overcomes the power of death?

Here is God on earth with the power to raise the dead just as easily as we would wake those who are asleep. That's the first thing John wants us to believe this morning.

I wonder if you believe it. Jesus overcomes the power of death. Secondly, though, Jesus overcomes the power of sin.

Now, it's a slightly obscure title, but what I want us to do is to consider the significance of death in the context of the whole Bible because death is not an accident.

[17:33] nor is it enough to say, well, it's simply the world that we live in, that people die. Well, it's true, but there's far more to it than that because in the worldview of the whole Bible, death is the result of sin.

By sin, we mean our rebellion against God that is at the heart of each one of us. The rebellion that says to God, I will not have you to be God over me.

And what I want us to do is just to turn back to the very beginning of Genesis, the very beginning of the Bible on page five, to see the consequences of mankind's sin.

Now, those of us who have been looking at the Bible overview over the last few months or so in our Bible study groups will have seen this, but I think it's worth spending time on it this morning. You see, what is at the heart of mankind's sin?

Well, have a look at Genesis chapter three, verse one. As the serpent says to the woman, did God actually say?

[18:43] It is doubting God's word. And that is echoed in verse four, you will not surely die.

Because, you see, God had told Adam and Eve that if they ate the fruit of that one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die.

But they ignore what he said. And then in verses five and six, they want to be like God. That phrase, knowing good and evil, would be better translated deciding or determining good and evil.

In other words, making up the rules for themselves. And if we stop to think about it, surely that is just how we live, isn't it? That is just how all of us by nature live.

we ignore God and we decide the basis on which we will run our lives. And God's punishment so clearly throughout Genesis is death.

So have a look over the page, Genesis 3, 23 to 24, as Adam and Eve are banished from God's presence forever. Genesis 3, verse 23, therefore the Lord God sent him out from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.

[19:54] He drove out the man and in the east of the Garden of Eden he placed a cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Sin leads to judgment and to death. And that spiritual death is later confirmed in physical death.

So look on to Genesis chapter 5 where we're given the first ever family tree in the Bible. And the point is that each one of Adam's descendants dies.

So 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.

[21:00] Verse 20, thus all the days of Jared were 962 years and he died. You see, Genesis shows us so clearly that death is the consequence of sin.

It's a link the rest of the Bible echoes as does Jesus himself in John's gospel. And I take it's this which explains Jesus' anger at Lazarus' death.

You see, I wonder if you noticed that back to John chapter 11. In verse 33, we're told he was deeply moved. And again, verse 38, he was deeply moved.

It's the language of anger, of indignation. Because death, you see, is not part of the good world that we live in as God designed it.

He is angry at the sin and rebellion that causes it. But then, of course, the wonderful truth is that as we see Jesus raising Lazarus to life from the dead, why it demonstrates that Jesus overcomes the power of sin and the death and judgment that it results in.

[22 : 14] Now, imagine, when you go and see a doctor, you haven't quite been feeling yourself for some time, and you say, Doctor, I'm feeling tired, I'm getting headaches, I'm losing weight, could there be anything that matters with me? Well, he does some tests and a few days later, he breaks the bad news.

But he tells you that if you undergo this course of treatment, there's a good chance you'll be cured. And wonderfully, you are. And you're no longer feeling dreadful, you're no longer feeling tired, the headaches have gone, and your weight is beginning to be put back on again.

The point is, you see, that once the underlying disease has been cured, why, the symptoms disappear? And you feel fine. Well, similarly, Lazarus is a huge visual aid, demonstrating that Jesus overcomes the power of sin, what we might call the underlying problem or the disease, and therefore, the symptoms disappear as he raises the dead to life.

Now, we're going to think over the next two or three weeks about how that happens and what exactly that looks like as we look at the rest of chapter 11 and go into chapter 12 and what our response should be. But for the time being, I want us to ask the question that we saw Jesus wants all of us to ask, which is this, do we believe that Jesus Christ is the one who overcomes death and overcomes the power of sin?

Indeed, that it's because he overcomes the power of sin and deals with human sin and rebellion that actually he also overcomes the power of death. Now, it may well be that I guess many of us have believed this about Jesus already, but which Christian doesn't need that belief strengthened, especially in our culture, which so runs away from the reality of death and pretends it doesn't exist.

[24 : 12] And I take it the danger for Christians in a culture like that is that we don't think about death either. And therefore we deprive ourselves of an opportunity to rejoice in what Jesus has done and his enormous power and authority.

or to put it another way, what is it that you glory in? We saw, didn't we, that Jesus raises Lazarus for the glory of God so that we might see his glory.

So let me ask, do you glory and delight in him, confident that Jesus has defeated these two great enemies of sin and death.

It's strange, isn't it, how we can find ourselves glorying in all the wrong things in our work if we happen to be fortunate enough to have a job which we enjoy and find satisfying or in our children if we're fortunate enough to have them or in our status and privilege if we happen to have those things.

We're so good aren't we at glorying in the wrong things. So will we glory in Jesus and delight in him, the one who overcomes sin and death?

[25 : 32] As a church family, will we encourage each other to make sure that it's Jesus who is at the centre of our affections, that it's Jesus who is at the core of our ambitions and that it's Jesus who is at the very heart of what we delight in?

But of course it may be that we don't believe this about Jesus or that it's perhaps rather new to us, in which case can we see that the raising of Lazarus is a powerful wake-up call to be realistic?

We can at times, can't we, be so caught up in the reality of the present that we ignore the reality of the future? I don't know who you think your greatest enemies are, perhaps that colleague at work who's always trying to do you down, perhaps the bank manager who never quite seems to see things your way, or perhaps that persistent health disorder that blights your life.

For get real, says Jesus, on your deathbed all those things will seem irrelevant. The greatest enemies we all face are our sin, our rebellion against God, and death.

And wonderfully, it's Jesus Christ alone who deals with both of those. And over the next couple of weeks, we'll see more clearly how he does that. well, for now, why don't I pray, and then we'll have time for questions if there are any questions.

[26 : 58] Let's pray together. When Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

God, we pray to you that we see here the enormous power of the Lord Jesus Christ over death and over sin.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, that you would help us, each one, to grow in our confidence that he is the one who defeats these two great enemies. we pray that as a result, we would live confident Christian lives, trusting in him and all that he has done.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.