

Where is God in a messed up world?

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[0 : 00] Well, thanks very much for coming today. It's lovely to have met quite a lot of you and hopefully I'll meet some more afterwards. So we're going to be thinking about where is God in a messed up world.

I don't know about you, but as I watch the news, I can certainly see that there are lots of things going wrong with the world. Behind all of today's events, obviously surrounding the inauguration of President Trump, we still see the same old news rumbling around, don't we?

From the refugee crisis in Syria and the Middle East generally to an avalanche in Italy yesterday. From the Gambian presidential crisis and the NHS headlines about it being apparently its worst ever state.

And 2016 was thought by many, wasn't it, to be one of the most depressing and unsettling years.

And many are saying, what's gone wrong with the world? Why is the world in such a mess?

And that's before we get to our own personal lives, isn't it? I don't know what suffering you've seen in your own world recently. I don't think I've seen that much myself at the age of 42. But just over the last couple of years, I've seen a friend die, very sadly, from bipolar disorder.

[1 : 09] I've seen another friend die of alcoholism. Another friend's marriage has broken down in really sad circumstances. And my uncle died very suddenly of cancer last year.

And then really sadly, a friend who's just a little bit older than me is dying at the moment of an incurable sarcoma at the base of her spine. And I'm sure we'll each have similar stories, won't we? That's not even to speak, actually, of the more private suffering experienced by many of us. So the unhappy or abusive marriage, the pain of childlessness, the stress of unemployment, and the money worries that lots of people have at the moment.

So I guess the question we're faced with is how can a good or a kind God look at suffering and do nothing? If there is a God, is it that he's impotent? Is he not capable of sorting out the world's problems?

Or is he unkind? Well, where we see so many untimely or violent deaths, and when we see people suffer with all sorts of things when they're still alive, how can we believe that there's a God in heaven who cares?

[2 : 11] Well, in a moment, we're going to read an extract together from John's biography of Jesus. He was one of Jesus's closest friends and associates. He spent all of Jesus's time kind of as a public figure with him.

And at the end of his biography, he tells us there's no way he could have written down everything that Jesus did during his earthly ministry. But he says that what he has recorded for posterity is recorded so that his readers can believe and so they can have true life through Jesus.

We'll be picking up the action halfway through John's Gospel, actually, so it's worth pointing out a couple of things. First of all, John's explained right at the start of the Gospel that Jesus is God's Son, who's always been at the Father's side in heaven, and that he came to earth to make God known to people.

He came and dwelt on earth as a man so that people could know God personally for themselves. And secondly, Jesus himself, as the events of the Gospel progressed, made it clear that he was God, even in the face of death threats against him for saying so.

And he didn't just show that by what he said about himself, but by the miracles or the signs, as John calls them, which he was able to carry out. And I think that might help us as we read this account now, just to have that background.

[3 : 21] So if you pick up the little blue John's Gospel you've got in front of you. Thanks, Jenny. If we flick through to chapter 11, which is on page 32 of the Gospels, and I'll read you, I'm going to

read verses 1 to 6 first of all, and then verses 14 to 44.

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.

His brother Lazarus was ill. So the sister 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. And then moving forward to verse 14. Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, that you may believe.

[4 : 43] But let us go to him. So Thomas called the twins, said to his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him. 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.

Then 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 he shall 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. When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, The teacher is here and is calling for you.

[5 : 52] And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

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?

[7 : 04] 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 would 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. Well, I think there are three threads that run through this story, three different things we can reflect on having read it together.

First of all, Jesus cares about suffering. He cares about suffering. Have a look with me at verse five if you flick back over the page. It's clear, isn't it, that Jesus had a close relationship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

He's not an impersonal or an aloof character, but someone who actually has real friendships. We're told he loves them. As God in human form, he has human relationships, just as we all do, with our friends, our family or our colleagues.

[8 : 07] And we see a real concern for Mary and Martha. In verse 23, over the page, we see him reassuring Martha. And when Mary comes and falls at his feet in verse 33, and he sees so many others of the crowd weeping, we see he's deeply moved and greatly troubled.

Apparently, our English translation, it's difficult in English to quite capture the sense of the original Greek word in verse 33, but it would have been something like outraged or angry at the death. We see a real human sadness in him, don't we? I'm sure we're all familiar with the sadness of having to go and see a loved one's grave as Jesus is about to do here. Often we know we have to do it, and yet a part of us actually doesn't really want to go.

And we see here that he's personally very upset. He's weeping. And this sadness and deep compassion for people is consistent with how God's been described in the Old Testament, not as an aloof or an uncaring God, but as a God who cares deeply about his people's suffering.

I'm reminded of a quote from the book of Isaiah which says, in all their distress, he too was distressed. But there are many other examples of God's love for his people. So to summarise, Jesus cares about suffering, he cares about death, he feels death is an outrage.

[9 : 21] And we ought to feel like that too, and we do, don't we? Death is an enormous, unwanted intruder. Naturally, we feel like that even when someone dies at the age of 70, which my uncle was last year, the three school years and ten.

Let alone when they died at a younger age or as a baby. There's a famous poem often read at funerals which says, death is nothing at all, I've only slipped away to the next room.

And I wonder whether that poem's really appropriate to how we actually feel when somebody dies. It doesn't feel like someone's just slipped away to the next room. It feels enormous, doesn't it? So Jesus cares about suffering, but secondly, Jesus is powerful over suffering.

I don't know whether there's anything you found a bit puzzling as you read this account just now. I must admit that I found verses 5 and 6 puzzling. I'll just read them to you again. 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.

When I heard that my grandmother had been rushed to hospital and was dying a few years ago, I have to say I couldn't get on the tube fast enough to get to her bedside. You'd expect to see Jesus rushing to Lazarus' bedside, but instead, from what we've just read, he was relaxed.

[10 : 34] He deliberately decides he's going to stay another two days where he is, which seems to be the mark of someone who knows he's actually in control of the situation. And in fact, as we read in verse 4, Jesus already knows that this illness is not eventually, not in the end, going to lead to death.

He knows it won't be the end of the story. Now, when Jesus does arrive at Bethany, where Lazarus lives, we're told Lazarus has already actually been dead for four days, so in fact, Jesus wasn't anywhere near getting to him before he died, was he?

And a whole crowd of mourners has gathered. We don't often see this so much in the British culture, but when my uncle died last year, his wife, my aunt, is from the Philippines, and she found that all of her Filipino friends and community from the local area where she lives in the state, came round every night for ten nights bringing food and prayed with her every night.

There was a real sense of community joining her in mourning, and I expect this scene was a bit like that, that everyone had gathered to comfort them. So Martha comes out from this crowd of mourners to meet Jesus, and you'll have noticed there's a bit of an implied rebuke in what both Martha and her sister Mary say to Jesus.

If he'd been there himself, they say, their brother wouldn't have died. And then in verse 37 you'll notice that people are saying, could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?

[12 : 02] So there are people saying, surely he could have stopped this happening. So again, people questioning if Jesus is God, then he must be very unkind if he couldn't stop him dying, or is it just that he's not powerful?

But then we see, don't we, there's absolutely no doubt about Jesus' power of the situation. So when they approach the tomb, he's completely confident that the stone can be rolled away.

He knows it won't expose the smell of a corpse, which is what Martha's worried about. Jesus reassures Martha that she will see God's glory, and then he just speaks to Lazarus, and out he comes.

It only takes a few words. So we see Jesus' power to raise the dead. In a sense, they were right then, weren't they, therefore, to say that if Jesus had been there with Lazarus, he wouldn't have died, or at least they're right to say if Jesus had wanted to stop it, he could have stopped it. He was completely in charge of the situation. So Jesus cares about suffering, and he's powerful over suffering. With a few words, he can raise someone from the grave.

[13 : 05] But more than that, the third thread that we see running through this story is that suffering has a greater purpose, it's not meaningless. Often people say that one big event of their life really changes their perspective on the rest of their life, don't they?

Whether it's the foreign aid worker who comes back and subsequently finds that they just can't cope with the materialism of their home country, or maybe the friend of mine who recovered from brain cancer and then found that she just hadn't got it in her to be stressed about little decisions in life. Suffering really wakes us up to big realities often, doesn't it? The writer C.S. Lewis famously said, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.

It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. It's as if through tragic events God's saying to us, wake up and listen. I read a blog entry this week written by an Australian church leader who's recently lost his 16-year-old grandson, very sadly, to cancer.

And he begins the blog by saying, death is the horrible reality of our life that screams there's something wrong with the world. So I guess the question is, what is it that Mary and Martha are supposed to be learning here and what can we learn from this story about the death and suffering in our own lives?

[14 : 24] Sometimes it's just helpful to have a visual aid to illustrate things, isn't it? From the scale model of the new housing development to the cooking demonstrations I used to be involved in when I was a chef, we're all used to the idea of physical demonstration, which then points to something bigger and teaches us something.

And in John's gospel he often shows us signs or miracles, so a physical thing everyone can see, which Jesus did, followed by an explanation of the deeper meaning of the sign, so the physical thing points to something else.

I wonder whether as we read it you saw any explanations or reasons for this sign of raising Lazarus from the dead or of what it points to. Well if you look with me at verse 4, as I mentioned before Jesus has already said that the illness won't end in death and that it will be for the glory of God. And he repeats that in verse 40 when he's talking to Martha, he says, didn't I tell you if you believed you'd see the glory of God? So that's one reason. Jesus has also said that it's happening so they might believe.

In fact in verse 15 he actually says it's better that he wasn't there so that they can believe. It's better he wasn't there when Lazarus was ill and dying. And in verse 42 he says that he's praying out loud so that people around him may believe that God sent him.

[15 : 42] And you might remember that fits with why John wrote down the gospel account in the first place. He wanted to write this gospel so that people could believe. So it's happened for God's glory and so they might believe. But thirdly it's happened to demonstrate the life beyond the grave that Jesus can give.

Let me read verses 25 and 26 again. 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? Everyone will die physically, won't they? And including Lazarus in this story, although he was raised from the dead here, he would die again.

But Jesus is offering life beyond this to those who believe. Lazarus physically getting up and walking out of the grave for everyone to see is a wonderful visual aid of a new eternal life which those who trust in Jesus can enjoy.

Elsewhere in the Bible, this is described as a life free of sickness, free of pain, free of tears, where we'll have new perfect physical bodies. So the purpose of the suffering that they go through here is to demonstrate a future truth that if they believe in Jesus, they can have eternal life and they'll live even though they die physically.

[16 : 57] You'll see that Jesus says, I am the resurrection of the life. So it's important we understand that it's Jesus who's key to the miracle and to the eternal life it points to and not anything special about Lazarus himself.

It's actually Jesus who blazes the way to this new life that goes on forever. Believing in Jesus is the key to this life. You see, Lazarus is being raised from the dead actually foreshadows an even greater miracle or sign and that's the sign of Jesus himself being raised from the dead.

If you looked further on in John's gospel you'd see John explain this. It's almost like the raising of Lazarus was a dress rehearsal for the main performance for Jesus himself dying and being raised again.

Again, when Jesus raised from the dead, as with Lazarus, people were able to see the empty tomb where he'd been, to touch him, to see that he was a real physical person and to share a meal with him. If we looked on at the start of chapter 12 we'd see Lazarus sharing a meal with his friends and family.

more of John's gospel we'd see that all along Jesus has been explaining that it's through his own death that people can have true life. Rather than his death being a tragic accident it was part of God's plan to bring people back to himself.

[18:10] And all through the Bible as well a suffering servant has been predicted someone who would come and lay down his life for God's people and now Jesus this suffering servant is here. So actually the answer to the world's suffering is found in Jesus.

He came to suffer to die himself, to raise his people to a new life where there won't be any more suffering. But we also need to remember this is for those who believe, for those who trust in Jesus. In the little bit that we didn't read in that chapter, in verse 10 of chapter 11 we see Jesus saying that we're naturally in the dark. That means we naturally go our own way in life, we ignore God, that's what the Bible calls sin.

We naturally love this darkness rather than light, we don't naturally want to follow God and we deserve God's judgment for that. And God's judgment for that, for our sin and for our rebellion and ignoring him is death.

So death entered the world when sin came into the world. And as an aside, that explains why we feel death isn't right, it's why it screams at us there's something wrong with the world.

[19:15] It's because the world wasn't designed with death meant to be included in it. on the cross when Jesus died, the worst suffering he experienced was actually that he was separated from his heavenly father, from God, as he took the judgment we deserved on himself.

And if we trust Jesus and come to him to ask for life, we can know he's borne God's judgment on our sin himself. We're forgiven by him and we have this promise of eternal life, life going on forever even after we die physically.

So the real purpose of Lazarus' suffering was to point to a bigger reality, the reality of eternal life continuing after our physical death. So back to the question we began with, where is God in this messed up world?

And the answer is he came to earth, to the messy world we live in, caring deeply about the suffering and sadness that we see. He came in the person of Jesus and was prepared to suffer and to die himself.

He was a God who rolled up his sleeves and bore more suffering than we could ever imagine. And he did it to take us to the new world where there isn't going to be any more dying or suffering or pain where we can live forever.

[20:26] As a postscript, I think it's worth us thinking about how people at the time responded to Lazarus being raised from the dead. Just after what we read in verse 45, we see that many of the Jews who've come along with Mary actually end up believing in Jesus.

Many believed. But we do see in verse 46, some report him to the authorities who then want to put a stop to what Jesus is doing. And in chapter 12, which we haven't got time to read now but do read it later, we see Lazarus and his family giving a dinner for Jesus.

And we see Mary pouring out really expensive oil on Jesus, showing how much she loves him, basically how grateful she is. If you'd asked her, she would have said she was glad about what had happened with Lazarus, which had shown her God's glory.

Indeed, it was better for her, just as Jesus had predicted it would be. And my question for us is how will we respond to what we've read today? Do we think it's better for us that God's brought suffering into the world and into our lives?

Or perhaps are we saying to ourselves that we simply won't believe because of all we've seen in the world or all that's happened in our own lives? Death is the hardest thing we face, isn't it? Jesus knows this and he weeps.

[21 : 44] It's one of the few things we still feel we can't control in this life. When my uncle's brain tumour was found last year, it was already too late for them to contain it. Even with the best medical technology in the world, there was nothing that could be done and it was very quick in the end.

But death itself is meant to point us towards the resurrection to eternal life that we can have. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Every time we hear of an untimely death, every time we stand at a graveside at a funeral, or indeed every time we consider our own death, we ought to think of this, of these promises for those who are trusting Jesus.

Hence, these words are often used at funeral services, aren't they? They're probably familiar to many because of that. My friend who I mentioned at the beginning, the friend who sadly is dying of sarcoma, trusts in Jesus herself and knows that she has eternal life.

I mentioned the topic of today's talk to her, and she's given me permission to say what she said in an email to a few of us on New Year's Eve. Sadly, she told us that they've had to stop her treatment now, and she now thinks that she only has weeks or maybe months to live.

[22 : 55] But wonderfully, what she said was, please do pray that daily I will remember the glorious home we've been promised thanks to our Lord's death on the cross. When I had my first diagnosis just over two years ago, I initially thought I had about three to six months to live, so I'm thankful for the extra time I've been given.

Please pray that there'll be fruit from my witness during this time, and whilst none of this could be described as my plan, please pray that I will understand his plan is better, and ultimately that his name will be glorified.

Well, it might be that a lot of this is new to you, or maybe you're grappling with the issues after many years of thinking it through and coming along to events like this.

Can I encourage you not simply to let things wash over you, but to keep investigating with an open mind? Do keep grappling with issues. A good way of doing that, I think Jenny's going to share some other ways in a bit, but I have sat down with others and read John's Gospel through just a little bit at a time over a cup of coffee.

I've done that once a week or once a fortnight, and I've done that with a friend in the city who, she hadn't looked into Christian things for many years, but she decided she really wanted to do it for herself, and we've had a really great time looking at John's Gospel together, so that's a good way to put today's talk in context, and just to kind of take things further, and there's also a course called Christianity Explores, but Jenny's going to plug that later, so I won't say too much more.

[24 : 16] work, and I'll take out, and I'll prove how long have you this pool is what Did Perks M lands .