

# The blind see

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today's reading is from the Gospel according to John, chapter 11, verses 1 to 16, which you'll find on page 1081 in the Church Bible. The death of Lazarus.

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? Jesus answered, are there not twelve hours in the day?

[ 1 : 05 ] 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.

Now 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. Well, good morning.

Well, let me add my welcome to you, and especially if you're here for the very first time. My name is Michael Lynn, and I'm a member of the congregation here at Grace Church Dulwich.

And today we're going to be looking at John chapter 11, verses 1 to 16. So why don't I pray as we begin. These things are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

[ 2 : 29 ] Heavenly Father, thank you for the privilege of opening up your word. And as we do, please give us eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to understand, and soft hearts to receive.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now Friday, 29th of March, 2019, is Brexit Day.

Yes, there's a huge cloud still hanging over that, but if my math is correct, it's only 47 more sleeps from today. The United Kingdom will be leaving the EU with or without a deal.

Now, for many of my colleagues, this is by a long margin the number one biggest issue in their lives. And it might well be a big issue for some of us today.

But there are other problems in the world too, aren't there? According to the papers, last I checked, terrorism is still a big issue. But so is climate change.

[ 3 : 33 ] Overpopulation, food waste, racism, poverty, funding for critical services, inequality of any kind. The list is endless. In fact, the problem facing humanity seems to be so many, so varied, and affects us in such different ways, it can be hard to figure out what the biggest problem we face.

Yet our culture and press consistently ignores the elephant in the room. And what is the elephant in the room, you may ask? Well, it's death.

Death is the biggest problem facing the human race. No one is able to escape death, yet this is the thing that we find ourselves most uncomfortable to talk about.

We don't really regard it as polite dinner table conversations. It's hard to talk about it, even amongst closest friends. A topic is best avoided at all cost. But my premise today is this, that Jesus in his glory have conquered death.

Jesus in his glory have conquered death. And my hope this morning is to show you why the story around Lazarus' illness and death points to something far more glorious and is such good news for you and me.

[ 4 : 53 ] Well, today's talk will be part of a trilogy of talks over the next three weeks. And here are some spoiler warnings. So my apologies if this story is new to you.

And today we start with one of Jesus' close friends, a man named Lazarus, who we're told fell ill and he dies. Next week we'll see the moving events surrounding his death, but also that Jesus raised him to life and the implications of that for all who believe in Jesus.

And the week after we will see how ironically by raising Lazarus to life, it actually sets up Jesus' own path to the cross. But for now, we'll just be looking at the first part.

Lazarus' illness and death and how that sets up Jesus' glory and what it means for us. Now, you may remember last week in chapter 9 of John's Gospel, we've seen that Jesus demonstrating his power through the healing of the beggar who was born blind.

And his healing divided opinion. The man came to faith in Jesus, yet the Pharisees, on the other hand, rejected him. That divided opinion continued right into chapter 10.

[ 6 : 08 ] And the more that people believed in him, the more the religious establishment sought to kill him. And by the end of chapter 10, just a few verses before our passage today, while Jesus was walking by the temple in Jerusalem, they tried to stone him and to arrest him.

The tension between him and the religious establishment has escalated to the point that Jesus had to escape and to cross to the other side of the Jordan. Imminent danger awaited him should he go back.

And thus, as we enter chapter 11, we find ourselves in the midst of that tension. And our passage today has a dual purpose. It's closely tied to each other.

And the first purpose is this. It's found in verse 4, where Jesus spills out that Lazarus' illness is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

And the second purpose is found in verse 15, where Jesus says to his disciples, It is for your sake I am glad I was not with Lazarus, so that you may believe.

[ 7 : 20 ] In other words, what we need to notice here is that the whole setup of the event surrounding the death of Lazarus and the miraculous raising of Lazarus is designed for us, A, to see Jesus for who he is, and B, to believe in him.

Hence my headings, which is listed on the sermon outline at the back of your service sheets. Firstly, it's all part of God's design and his plan is to glorify Jesus.

Secondly, God glorifies Jesus so we might believe in his Son. So firstly, God's plan is to glorify Jesus. Now at the time Jesus received the news about Lazarus' condition, Lazarus was still alive.

The writer, the apostle John, goes to great length to inform us that Lazarus was ill. It's right from the very beginning, look with me at verse 1, and there it is at verse 2, that Martha and Mary's brother Lazarus was ill.

In verse 3, Jesus receives a message that Lazarus was ill and acknowledged that in verse 4. And then finally, over the page in verse 6, we read of Jesus' decision to delay going to Lazarus for two days when he heard Lazarus was ill.

[ 8 : 43 ] Lazarus was at the brink of death, but he was still alive. And I think John wants us to feel the very human side of that story.

We ought to feel the helplessness, the agony, the sadness, the frustration, the anger, the distress, the anguish, the pain, the whole range of emotions that we might go through when someone we love is close to death.

John wants us to feel how unpredictable death is, how death seems to steal people away, triggering a profound sense of loss, how death is always just one step away, knocking at that door.

He doesn't want us to stick our head in the sand or escape the reality of death. None of us will know when it will come to our loved ones or ourselves or anyone.

John wants us to feel how truly tragic death really is. Our culture wants us to believe that death can be a beautiful thing, that somehow because death is part of life that we should embrace it, celebrate it even.

[ 9 : 55 ] But no, it is ugly. Death really is a terrible, terrible thing. But as we're told of Lazarus' condition, John wants us to feel the closeness of Jesus' relationship with the siblings, the humanity of Jesus.

He wants us to see Jesus isn't just a God who is far flung, a long way off with his head in the heavens, or a God who may be created the world in the beginning, but nowadays have no active role in his creation, no meaningful relationship with those he created, no, John wants us to feel the very real, very human, but also divine love that Jesus shares with his people.

He wants to show us Jesus, who is himself God, but also a man who desires real relationships with people, especially those who are broken in spirit.

And see how the siblings love Jesus in verse 2. And Mary's extraordinary act of devotion, anointing Jesus with ointment and wiping his feet with her hair.

And in Mary and Martha's desperate plea for help in verse 3, Lord, he whom you love is ill. And Jesus is also seen loving the siblings in verse 5.

[11:15] Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. John wants us to know that every decision Jesus makes, every action, are all undergirded by his great love for people.

Now Lazarus wasn't just suffering from a common cold or something, he was at the brink of death.

And no doubt Jesus knew this, which might make Jesus' response in verse 4 a bit surprising.

But, when Jesus heard the message, he said, this illness does not lead to death. Well, that's odd.

Why did Jesus say that?

Now, was he giving cold, superficial comfort? Or was he brushing it off? Pretending Lazarus wasn't gravely ill? Or was he saying that Lazarus wouldn't physically die?

Well, certainly not. At some point between verse 6 and 11, we're told Lazarus dies. Now, right from the very first miracle, or sign, as it's known in John's Gospel, you know, the one where Jesus turns water into choice wine, John connects the signs of Jesus to the manifestation of his glory.

[12:28] And so it is here. Look with me at verse 4 again. But when Jesus heard the message, 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's glory and Jesus' glory would be powerfully demonstrated through Lazarus' resurrection. But at this point in the chronology, there's no way of knowing that yet.

And certainly, Martha and Mary couldn't see that yet either. Up to this point, they probably heard about the many healing miracles of Jesus, like giving sight to the man born blind, as we saw last week.

Or they probably heard about the healing of the official son, back in chapter 4, where Jesus healed his son, even while he was physically in a different city, simply by saying the words.

Martha and Mary knew and trusted Jesus as their Lord, and knew Jesus had the power to prevent their brother from dying. Perhaps Jesus could have just said the word, and like the healing of the official son, Lazarus would also have been healed.

[13:40] Yet we read in verse 6, So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

And I take it that many of us might struggle with this. How could Jesus, given his relationship he has with them, knowing the severity of Lazarus' illness, and sensing the desperation of his siblings, and having the power to do something about it, how could Jesus delay going back deliberately?

You see, this isn't some fairy tale Hollywood story, where our hero gets Lazarus just in the nick of time, just to save him from the jaws of death. No, our hero's delay meant Lazarus' death was inevitable.

In fact, in verse 17, By the time Jesus got to him, Lazarus has already died four days. His body has started decomposing. His sisters were sorrow-stricken.

In mourning, in verse 21, Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if he had been here, my brother would not have died. And also her sister Mary, collapsing at the feet of Jesus, crying those exact same words to Jesus in verse 32.

[15:01] Lord, if he had been there, my brother would not have died. Why, Lord, why didn't you save him when you could? It seems so cold, so harsh, so difficult to accept.

Now, my grandfather is currently in a care home in Taiwan. He's 90, he's frail, and his health and mental state is in decline.

There's been a few close calls, a few scares already, but no one knows how long he's got left in this world. We used to Skype him regularly, but since his hearing has gone, connecting with him has been much more difficult.

Now, I'd like, I'd love for him, I'd love to be there for him, but it's not like Taiwan's just a couple of hours drive from London, and I could go and visit him in the weekend. I'd love for God to heal him, to improve his health. So, in the least, at least Annie and I could have a Skype conversation with him again, and greet him with our own voices, especially in this Chinese New Year season.

[16:16] And I take it that many of us would also have close family members who are suffering some sort of physical or mental ailment. It wouldn't be wonderful if God just heals them, to rescue them immediately, without going through any more of the agony of watching them deteriorate, or seeing them in pain, right now, without delay.

Or we might be going through tough times in our own lives. It wouldn't be great if God just removes our obstacles. You know, that bullying boss or colleague who's making our life, our work life, an absolute misery.

Or our children's incessant crying, maybe turned to laughter, to silence, to peace even. That wouldn't be great if God just solved our money problems.

Our depression, gone, stress, gone. Hurt, gone. Now it's not necessarily wrong to ask God to help us, especially when we are genuinely experiencing suffering.

But we must be careful not to anchor our faith based on our perception of how well we think God responds to our prayers. God's not a genie.

[17:33] He's not something that pops out by rubbing a lamp and grants wishes on demand. No, he is God. He doesn't necessarily solve all our burning issues.

And he doesn't necessarily answer our prayers the way we'd like him to. Our tendency is to see only what we need, only what we think is right, without considering a big picture.

Without considering a bigger picture. Without considering a bigger picture. Yet God always has the big picture in view. The way he works may be unexpected, undesired even.

His timing might be on a completely different scale to ours. And while we're on this earth, we may never understand why he does certain things. But, yet God's plans are always bigger, more complete, more just, and more glorious than we can ever imagine.

And so it is with Jesus' timing to go to Lazarus. Jesus intended to delay. Lazarus died. But you see, without Lazarus' death, the world would have only seen a healing miracle, not a glorious resurrection.

[18:46] Conquering death. Lazarus' death and resurrection shows Jesus has absolute power over death, and proves that he is God. Lazarus' death and resurrection points to Jesus' own death and resurrection.

So that in believing in Jesus, all believers will also one day be raised with God. And in raising Lazarus from death to life, Jesus is glorified, fulfilling God's plan.

So firstly, God's plan is to glorify Jesus. And secondly, through glorifying Jesus, we might believe in him. God glorifies Jesus, so we might believe in his son.

Now look with me at verse 7. After he stayed two days longer, he said to his 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? Now perhaps the disciples didn't know what was really happening with Lazarus. But it's clear they were hesitant for Jesus to go back to Judea, where Lazarus was.

[20:00] They were fully alert to the very real dangers awaiting Jesus there. And that image of the Jews scumching up their faces, maybe gnashing their teeth, and picking up stones in their hands, ready to hurl at Jesus.

That was still very fresh in their memories. But look at the way Jesus answered in verse 9. 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. In John's gospel, the light of the world is Jesus, and Jesus wants them to know that his time with them is limited.

A time will come soon enough when he will die on that cross. The good shepherd laying down his life for his sheep. And while he is on this earth, he must do the will of God the Father to fulfill his mission.

And a necessary part of that mission is to go back to dangerous Judea to raise Lazarus from the dead. And while Jesus is on earth, the disciples too must take the most of their limited time with Jesus.

[ 21 : 15 ] And to be with Jesus is to be in the light. It's like walking the day, increasing in spiritual understanding, seeing things with clear spiritual spectacles, walking without stumbling.

But to walk without Jesus is like walking in pitch black darkness. Our eyes cannot see anything without light. We can't even see the tip of our nose, let alone our legs.

We may try to feel the next step with the tip of our toes, but we'd have no idea if we're going to be stepping on flat ground or on slippery rock.

Every step we take is vulnerable to stumbling, risking life-changing spiritual injuries. In verse 11, Jesus pushes on with his mission.

He says to his disciples, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go awaken him. The disciples said to him, Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.

[ 22 : 16 ] And now Jesus has spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest and sleep. Now we often think of the disciples as being slow on the uptake, but to be fair on them, Jesus hasn't explicitly said that Lazarus has died.

So why was Jesus talking in this way? Well, I think it's to underline the absolute power of Jesus over death. It's to prove Jesus really is God, because only God can do the impossible.

That to Jesus, raising the dead, even decomposing bodies, is as easy as waking up someone from sleep. Actually, it's probably easier than that.

As a teenager, getting me out of bed was nigh on impossible for my poor mother. She could shout, Wake up, wake up, all she'd like, until her face was blue. But I'd still be under the duvet. But the disciples weren't yet convinced to go back to Judea.

They were still concerned about the very real threat of being stoned. That's because they hadn't yet realized that Lazarus has died. So, Jesus spelt it out for them, and in doing so, also told them why Lazarus had to die.

[ 23 : 26 ] Look at me at verse 14. 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. Lazarus was not only a close friend of Jesus, but he's also a friend of the disciples, which makes not only going back to him necessary on a human level to be with his siblings and to mourn with them, but more importantly, that Jesus would wake him up so that people might believe.

And as if to highlight the importance of believing, notice Jesus was glad. The word in the Greek is literally rejoice, and there are not many places in John's Gospel that Jesus expresses a sense of joy, but this is one of them.

Jesus says he rejoices right in the same sentence of announcing his close friend's death to his other friends. But before we think it sounds insensitive or inappropriate, notice with me the confidence and the reason for Jesus' joy.

It is so that you may believe. Indeed, there is no greater joy for Jesus, the great shepherd, than to reclaim those who once were lost but now are found, to save you and to save me, who were once dead in our sins but made alive in Jesus.

[ 25 : 00 ] But you might ask, why do the disciples need to believe? After all, aren't they already followers of Jesus? Well, I think it's because even though they may already believe in Jesus, they still didn't understand his power.

They still didn't understand his glory. And if we're honest, isn't that also true of us? Perhaps, you've been a Christian for years but deep down there are still some areas in your life that you wouldn't let Jesus take control.

Still resisting change in your heart. Areas that are perhaps off limits to Jesus. Effectively saying to him, Jesus, you can come this close, thanks very much, but the rest is ringed off with hazard tape. Caution, keep out. A sort of, what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours attitude. Do we compartmentalize our career and our spiritual life?

Or money matters? Or might it be an area of our character? Perhaps we're prone to expressing frustration or lashing out. Often, about the tiniest things.

[ 26 : 09 ] We might feel, even feel justified when we do it. Yet we end up hurting those who love us most. Or perhaps it's our insecurities, our addiction, our worries, our regrets, or the bitterness that we harbor.

believe in the glorious, risen Jesus. Allow him to take over the big things and the little things in your life.

And the amazing truth of the gospel is that what's mine is his, but what's his is mine. What are the no-go areas in your life?

What things would you let Jesus into this week? Now, you may have heard from chapter 20, verse 31 last week, but I think it's worth repeating here.

As you see, the dual purpose for today fits perfectly with the overall purpose of John's gospel. These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name.

[ 27 : 22 ] Lazarus' death and resurrection shows Jesus has absolute power over death, showing Jesus' glory and proves that he is the Son of God, and anyone who believes in him may have life in his name.

Now, death is still the biggest problem facing the human race, but for believers, the sting of death has been nullified through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. He has conquered death.

And as we see that Jesus has dealt with the elephant in the room, all the other problems we face might just start to pale into insignificance. Our insecurities, our addictions, our worries, our regrets, the bitterness that we harbor.

Although these problems may continue to bother us from time to time, it won't last forever. Anyone who believes in Jesus as their Lord and Savior and who dies will be raised again and be with God in his glory forever.

And I suppose instead of counting down to Brexit day, why not count down to the first of the real lives events run here by Grace Church, which is, if my math is correct, 30 days from now.

[ 28 : 41 ] And why not invite someone so they might see something of the glory of the Lord Jesus so they too might believe. God's plan is to glorify Jesus. God glorifies Jesus so we might believe in him.

And by believing we may have life in his name. Let me pray for us to finish. So that you may believe.

Our Heavenly Father, thank you that you have planned before the beginning to glorify your Son so that we might believe. thank you so much for Jesus who pay the heavy price of our sin, taking the punishment we deserve so that death would have no hold on us who believe in him.

Please forgive us that even as we believe in him, we still have trouble grasping just how glorious Jesus really is. We still find it difficult to let Jesus be our Lord, ruling us as king in every aspect of our lives.

Please help our unbelief. Help us trust him more and more and please help align our desires, our thoughts, our priorities to be more like his each and every day.

[ 30 : 01 ] In Jesus Christ most holy name I pray. Amen.