

The glory of God in the face of death

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[0 : 00] The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber. And, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

[1 : 03] The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover, by them is your servant warned. In keeping them there is great reward. Many of the Jews there.

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 the 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.

[2 : 50] 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.

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.

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, What do you think?

That he will not come to the feast at all? Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know so that they might arrest him.

Well, this is the third of our series, our mini-series of talks, looking at John chapter 11. And today we're going to see exactly how it is that Jesus Christ can offer life after death.

[4 : 20] If you've been here for the last two weeks, then you'll know that in this chapter, Jesus offers life with God now, which continues after death. It's there back in chapter 11, verses 25 and 26.

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 too, haven't we, that as Jesus makes this claim, he is not simply speaking hot air.

We've seen the evidence as Jesus raises Lazarus to life.

Here is someone who has been dead for four days. And what happens, 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, his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go.

[5 : 26] As such, of course, these words of Jesus anticipate what he will say to all those who have put their trust in him, as after they have died in this world, he subsequently raises them to life in the next world.

But, of course, it begs the question, how is this possible? And that is the question which this next section, verses 45 to 54, answers.

How can we be certain that we have this life? Well, that is what this section answers. Because I guess it's easy, isn't it, simply to have a kind of vague hope in heaven without really ever being certain of that for ourselves.

Perhaps to speak of a hope in heaven in the same way that we might say, well, you know, I hope the sun shines today. And even as Christians, when we're faced with the reality of death, the fact that there might be life beyond the grave can at times seem a very long shot indeed.

Well, the key to being certain is understanding why Jesus died. Have a look again at verses 50 and 51. 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.

[7 : 02] He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation. Notice how John deliberately puts this prediction of the death of Jesus right in the middle of this whole section on Lazarus.

Okay, so we've seen in the last two weeks that all the way up to today's section we'd be focusing on Lazarus. And then as we go into chapter 12, the focus is still on Lazarus as we see the celebration dinner that is given in Jesus' honor having raised Lazarus to life.

But John deliberately sandwiches this prediction of Jesus' death in the middle of the Lazarus story to show us how it is that Jesus can indeed offer resurrection life beyond the grave.

It is through his death. What you'll see, there's an outline on the back of the service sheet. Firstly, Jesus' death and the plotting of men.

In verses 45 to 46, some of those who saw Jesus raise Lazarus tell the Pharisees, the Jewish religious authorities.

[8 : 13] Verse 45, many of the Jews therefore 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.

And so, verse 47, the meeting is called at the Sanhedrin, the governing Jewish body working under Roman occupation. And then John sort of gives us the details, the minutes, if you like, of that meeting in verse 47.

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.

Do you notice that even though they would no doubt love to have denied the fact that the miracle took place, no doubt they'd have loved to have denied that Lazarus rose from the grave, actually that is the one thing they cannot do.

They cannot deny that Lazarus is now alive again. I guess it's a sobering thought, isn't it, for the cynic today?

[9 : 26] Perhaps those who pride themselves on thinking, well, of course, if I had been there, you know, in the first century, I'd never have fallen for these kinds of miracles. I'd never have been that gullible. But don't forget, there were cynics in the first century as well.

And the minutes of this meeting of the Sanhedrin shows they'd have loved to disprove the fact that Jesus rose Lazarus from the dead. But that is the one thing they cannot do.

And it kills off, doesn't it, any idea that miracles by themselves will bring people to put their trust in Jesus. When I was a student, a book very influential at the time was published called Power Evangelism.

And its basic argument was that if only people could see the same kind of miracles today that Jesus did 2,000 years ago, then surely they would put their trust in him and believe in him.

Well, here in John chapter 11 is the greatest of Jesus' miracles. No one could deny that Lazarus, who was dead, four days later, is now alive.

[10 : 38] And yet, instead of believing in Jesus, the establishment instead plots to kill him. J.C. Ryle comments on this passage, to fancy as some do that if they saw something wonderful done

before their eyes in confirmation the gospel, they had at once cast off all indecision and serve Christ is a mere idle dream.

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

None can melt it but the grace of God. So, what is it that the establishment of Jesus' day are afraid of?

Well, have a look at verse 48. They fear that lots of people will follow Jesus. They fear that will lead to civil unrest. the Roman authorities will start to panic and there will be a crackdown.

They fear specifically, you notice, for their place, in other words, for the temple, the temple building, and for the nation, the semi-independent power that they had within the Roman Empire.

[12:00] They're worried, in other words, about maintaining the status quo, the power, the privilege they have, their standing within society.

Now, I take it the authentic Jesus has always been an inconvenience to the establishment like that.

I remember some time ago a church I belonged to did some Saturday morning interviews on Wimbledon Common and asked people the very simple question, who do you think 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 this kind of charismatic personality with an extraordinary gift for healing. Someone else as a glorified social worker. I guess they're the sort of Jesus that people on the whole like to believe in.

It's what people imagine Jesus was like. Someone who fits in with our own agenda who doesn't upset the status quo. And yet what we see in the gospel accounts is that the authentic Jesus was quite unlike that.

[13:19] Which is why the authorities here are so rattled. It's so often the case that the religious establishment is far more concerned with the status quo with maintaining ancient buildings, with the place of the church in the life of the nation, concerned for their power and prestige.

It's why I take it authentic Christianity is so often despised by those who are outwardly religious.

Well, Caiaphas, the high priest, has a solution.

Verse 49. 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's better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

What's he saying? Let's quietly do away with Jesus and get on with our lives in peace and quiet.

And we're told, notice verse 53, that from that day on, they made plans to put him to death.

And let me say that if that is how we see Jesus' death, simply as a kind of politically expedient, a politically motivated murder, then we'll never see the real significance of his death.

[14:51] We'll never make the connection between the death of Jesus and the promise of resurrection life. one of those interviews that was conducted on Wimbledon Common, I remember very clearly one gentleman being asked what he thought about the death of Jesus, and he simply replied, what a terrible tragedy, one with so much potential, dying so young.

Well, if that is our view of Jesus' death, we'll never grasp how he can offer life after death. death.

So, Jesus' death and the plotting of men. Secondly, Jesus' death and the planning of God.

Because what we see so clearly is that Jesus' death was far from an act of political expediency.

Verse 51, Caiaphas 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.

This is why John, you see, is so anxious to record the minutes of this meeting of the Sanhedrin, because behind the plotting of men stands the clear plan, direction, and will of God.

God has a purpose for Jesus' death. Verses 51 to 52 is the explanation from God himself as Caiaphas unwittingly acts as God's mouthpiece.

[16:28] It speaks, doesn't it, of the awesome power of God, the awesome sovereignty of God, that in the very words that Caiaphas uses to plot the death of Jesus, God is explaining through him for those who have ears to hear precisely how Jesus and his death, how God through the death of Jesus is carrying out his purposes.

As such, this is one of the clearest explanations in John's Gospel of what Jesus' death accomplished. Notice, first of all, in the death of Jesus, death is defeated.

That word die in verse 50, it sums up the big Bible idea of death that we thought about last week, that all of us willfully reject God, that we all rebel against him, that all of us are naturally under the judgment of God, all of us face death on the final day.

So why does Jesus die? It is so we won't perish. So we needn't be separated from God. So we needn't face an eternity in hell.

And of course, Lazarus, if you want a vigil aid of this, Lazarus is the great vigil aid, isn't he? as he is raised from death to life.

[17:56] He is a vigil aid of someone who is rescued from perishing and brought to eternal life. In the death of Jesus, death is defeated. But secondly, in the death of Jesus, life is secured.

Because there's a word that's repeated in verses 50 to 52, easy to miss it, because it's such a common word in the way in which we use it, but it is that little word for, for, for, it literally means on behalf of.

Just have a look at verses 50 to 52 again. 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.

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.

That word for is a word that John uses a lot to describe the death of Jesus for others, on behalf of others.

[19:07] It is the language of sacrifice, it's the language of substitution, dying on behalf of others. And of course it echoes the language of the temple.

The Old Testament established the principle that an animal could stand in the place of the people and be killed in their place, and that God's judgment, rather than falling on the people, would instead fall on the animal.

Substitution and sacrifice. Just keep a finger in John chapter 11 and turn back to Leviticus chapter 16.

Leviticus chapter 16 in the Old Testament on page 114. Now, Leviticus 16 will be familiar to those of us who were in growth groups back in the summer when we looked at the Bible overview, and likewise for those in our youth group in JAM who are doing that, who are doing it at the moment. But just see as we look at this little section on the regulations for the sacrificial system, how the principle of substitution and sacrifice, a death in the place of others, is established.

[20:37] Leviticus 16 verses 15 to 17. Speaking of the high priest, then he 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.

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 all the assembly of Israel.

Do you get the point? Leviticus establishes the principle of substitution and sacrifice. An animal bears the punishment of death that the people should have borne, taking the judgment in their place.

And yet, of course, wonderfully, Leviticus doesn't simply establish the principle, it also looks forward. It looks forward to the perfect sacrifice, which brings us back to John chapter 11, verses 50 and 52.

[22:08] Jesus will die both as a sacrifice and as a substitute, fulfilling everything the Old Testament sacrificial system pointed to.

Now, that point, of course, is made even more powerfully in the context of Lazarus. Look back to verse 25 of John chapter 11. I am the resurrection and the life. Jesus is the resurrection.

He will be raised to resurrection life as judge and lord of all. So here's the extraordinary thing, you see, that Jesus, who is the judge at the end of time, and yet he has come down to earth to pay the punishment for our sin and rebellion in our place, dying on behalf of his people.

If you've been to St. Botolph's Aldersgate in the city, where I spend part of my time midweek, you'll know that in what used to be the church graveyard, there is now a wonderfully beautiful park.

It's the biggest park in the city of London, and it's a favourite with tour guides, partly because it is the biggest park in the city of London, but also because of a 50-foot long memorial stone.

[23 : 26] It's called the Watts Memorial, and it's 50 feet long, and it's composed of a whole series of tiles, probably each tile about four times the size of one of those bricks, so about that kind of size, and each tile tells of someone who heroically died to give up their lives for another, and there are just about 100 or 120 of these tiles, and it's very, very moving, extraordinary.

So knowing that I was preaching on this Sunday, I was just looking at some of those tiles last week. So Mary Rogers, stewardess of a boat named Stella, on March 30th, 1899, sacrificed herself by giving up her life belt and voluntarily going down in the sinking ship.

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

There was then Thomas Griffin, and again the tile simply read, Labourer, April 12, 1899, in a boiler explosion at a Battersea sugar refinery, was faithfully scolded in returning for his workmate.

It's extraordinary, isn't it, when we read men and women who have given their lives for others, and especially perhaps when presented with a whole tableau of tiles like that.

[25 : 05] Well, how much more wonderful that Jesus Christ, indeed the one who is the judge of all on the judgment day, has come down to die on behalf of us, so that we might be forgiven.

judgment. Which, of course, that explains, doesn't it, the claim that is at the very heart of this chapter we've been looking at over these last few weeks, verses 25 to 26. That is how Jesus can raise the dead.

The dead raised no longer facing death, but instead life. So let me finish by applying this teaching to us, and first of all, I hope we can see the great assurance that there is for all those who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It explains why a friend of my mother's in her mid-80s, being taken to hospital two weeks ago in an ambulance, clearly very seriously ill indeed, was able to say to the ambulance crew, don't worry about me, I know where I'm going.

And the only reason I know that is because the ambulance crew I think were so surprised, they then told the people in the hospital, who then told the relatives, which is then how my mother was able to tell us just a couple of weeks ago, real confidence, humanly frail, dying, she did die, and yet actually real confidence, I know where I'm going.

[26 : 37] I take it because she understood that Jesus had died on her behalf, she had put her trust in him, she had begun to experience resurrection life with him in this life, and she knew that was going to continue in the next.

So I take it there's great assurance here for the dying, for the dying Christian, as we remember that Jesus died on our behalf, I take it we can look at Lazarus with great hope, he is a visual aid of what will happen as Jesus says to us after we have died, just as he said to Lazarus, come out, be raised to new life.

life. I take it as great assurance here for the new Christian, perhaps thinking, can I really be sure I'm forgiven?

Can I really be confident that I've begun a living relationship with the living God? Can I really be certain, can I be raised to life in the new creation?

Yes, because it depends not on how we feel or what we've done, but on the death of Jesus on our behalf. I take it there's great assurance here for the discouraged Christian.

[27 : 57] Perhaps the Christian life is hard at the moment, perhaps it's hard at school or hard at home or hard in the workplace, perhaps at times we're tempted to feel let down by Jesus in some way.

We wonder perhaps as we look at the circumstances of our lives, does he really love me? Can I really commit my life to him? Well, here is the reminder that he has died on our behalf, in our place. And there's great assurance too for those of us who have been following Jesus Christ in the long haul over many years as he cares for us and as he promises that he will take us to be with him in the new creation.

Well, if you're here this morning and you haven't yet put your trust in Jesus, it's a great morning to be with us for. I hope we can see this is both a warning and an encouragement.

It's an encouragement, isn't it? Because I take it it shows us actually there is no more wonderful thing than following the Lord Jesus Christ. There's no more wonderful thing. The one who has died on our behalf, the one who promises life with him, life with him now, life with him in the new creation, in the next life, beyond the grave.

[29 : 18] And yet, of course, that encouragement, it also has a warning, doesn't it? That if we reject him, then actually we are rejecting life.

Rejecting life with him now, rejecting life with him in the new creation. Let's spend some time in quiet and then I shall lead us in prayer.

Amen. Amen.