

Confidence in life

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is taken from John's Gospel, chapter 11, verses 17 to 27, and it can be found on the surface sheet. Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for 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.

[1 : 11] Suze, thanks very much indeed for reading for us. Lovely to see everyone again this morning. Why don't I pray for us as we look at John, chapter 11.

Let's pray. I am the resurrection and the life. Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for this glorious chapter in John's Gospel.

Thank you that you are a God who speaks to us in all the circumstances of life. And we pray, therefore, this morning, please would you help us to grow in our belief and confidence in Jesus, in who he is, and in his great claims in the face of death.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Well, this is the second in our series of talks, Facing Death with Confidence.

There's been a lot of advice over the last few weeks about how to cope with these extraordinary times, how to cope with lockdown. Books to read, podcasts to listen to, hobbies to start or resurrect, keep busy, keep active.

[2 : 22] And increasingly, as well, discussions about death and dying. On Radio 4's Women's Hour last week, Jenny Murray devoted a whole hour to a discussion about how to die well.

It started with the admission that we so rarely discuss death. The interviews covered issues such as making sure your financial will is up to date, what good palliative care looks like, whether to stay at home or go into hospital, making sure you have a living will.

It was sensitive. It was well put together. And yet, it didn't go far enough. Because the really important question wasn't mentioned.

How do we prepare not just for the approach of death, but how do we prepare for that moment when we are then cast out into eternity?

What lies beyond death? Surely, any discussion about dying well needs to engage with that question more than any other.

[3 : 33] And that is why we're looking at John chapter 11 for these four weeks. It's why it's such an important chapter. Have a look again at chapter 11, verse 1, where we started last week.

Now, a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. And then verse 3. So the sister sent to Jesus, saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

And yet we saw last week that rather than leaving immediately to go and heal Lazarus, Jesus delays until Lazarus has died. It is a shocking moment.

And yet, as we saw last week, it is a great act of love. Because Jesus is teaching us that if we are to have confidence in the face of death, that we need to come face to face, firstly, with who he is as God in the flesh.

And secondly, we need to come face to face with death. Do listen to that talk online if you missed it. Well, this week in verse 17, we pick up from the events of last week.

[4 : 44] Jesus has now come to Bethany, where Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days. We see the conversation with Lazarus's sister Martha as she comes out on the road to meet Jesus.

And it's a conversation that reveals the nature of genuine faith. And hopefully you'll have an outline, which was sent by Vicki earlier on in the week.

And we're simply going to look, first of all, to see what insufficient faith looks like. And then we're going to see what sufficient or adequate or genuine faith looks like. Firstly, then, insufficient faith. Verses 17 to 24. In these verses, Martha reveals for us what insufficient faith looks like.

Faith, in other words, that falls short in the face of death. Because faith in the Bible always means trust, but trust on the basis of evidence.

[5 : 47] That is very different, of course, from the popular understanding of faith, that it's a leap in the dark in the absence of evidence. But just as you might take your car in for a service and perhaps the mechanic phones you up and says that the brakes need repairing and that they need some work.

It would be very odd, wouldn't it, to reply, don't worry, everything will be fine. I have faith. Now, of course, that may well be on the basis of evidence.

If perhaps you've recently had some work done on the brakes and you suspect they're probably fine and the gouge is trying to rip you off and get you to authorise unnecessary work.

And yet, if the brakes really are dodgy, then no amount of faith is going to help. So then, what does insufficient faith look like?

Well, firstly, we see insufficient faith in Jesus. Verse 21. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

[6 : 59] Now, it seems that at this point, Martha believes that Jesus could have healed her brother while he was ill, but she doesn't now believe that he can raise him back to life again.

In other words, her view of Jesus is too small, just as those today who say that Jesus was a great healer or a wonderful miracle worker, but no more than that, have too small a view of Jesus.

The following letter was written to the Times just a week or so after lockdown began. It was from a lady in Scotland. Dear Sir, this virus has a lot to answer for.

I have this strange man hanging about the house. He says he lives here. Well, there is one lady trying to reacquaint herself with her husband during lockdown.

And it may well be that some of us need to reacquaint ourselves, or perhaps even acquaint ourselves the very first time with the real Jesus. Jesus, not a small Jesus who is a miracle worker and no more, but the real Jesus, the one who was God in the flesh.

[8 : 19] And interestingly, it's precisely there that Martha gets to by the end of this conversation with Jesus. If you look on to verse 27, she said to him, Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

Secondly, insufficient faith in God. Verse 22. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.

Now, of course, at one level, there's nothing wrong at all with that statement. God can indeed do anything. And then I hope we can see there's a sense in which it's also insufficient. Plenty of people believe in God.

The devil himself believes in God. Rather like the funeral which I took several years ago, visiting the bereaved family beforehand.

It wasn't a family I knew, so I asked about the deceased, at which point the husband assured me, Don't worry, she believed in God. Well, it's insufficient because genuine Christian faith is not about kind of some vague belief in God somewhere, some kind of God, but rather is specifically focused on a belief in Jesus Christ, who is God in the flesh come to earth, the one who therefore reveals God to us.

[9 : 47] And again, it's where Martha gets to in verse 27, as she acknowledges that Jesus is indeed the Christ. He is God's King.

Thirdly, insufficient faith in the resurrection, verses 23 and 24. 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. Now, once again, at one level, Martha's comments look promising.

She believes there's going to be some kind of general resurrection at the end of time. Now, it may be no more than the kind of thing you often hear when someone's died, you know, they go on to a better place, that kind of thing.

Or it may be a little bit more concrete than that, perhaps on the basis of an Old Testament passage, such as Daniel chapter 12, verse 2, that is there on the outline.

[10:49] And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting content. But whichever, it seems that Martha is really saying no more than this.

Lazarus is dead, but I know that death won't have the final word. I know that he will rise again on the last day.

And it's insufficient because in verse 25, Jesus claims that he is the resurrection and the life. He alone is the one who secures life after death.

And therefore, her faith needs, rather than to be in this kind of general idea of resurrection, it needs specifically to be in him. Now, it may well be that you're someone, and to be honest, you don't really know what you believe.

Perhaps you are full of questions. In which case, I want to encourage you to ask those questions.

Do ask me or ask a Christian friend. Or why not read through John's Gospel?

[11:59] It'll only take a couple of hours or so to read. And as you do so, keep asking yourself, who is Jesus? Is he really God in the flesh?

That is the central claim that lies at the heart of John's Gospel. Will it lie at the heart of the Christian faith? That is the key question to keep asking. But it may be that you would describe yourself as someone who has faith.

But let me ask, have you ever examined it to see whether it's the kind of faith that Jesus recognizes? There is such a thing as insufficient faith.

Inadequate faith. Although because, of course, we live in a culture which so often talks about faith in very vague and general terms, and assumes that any faith, wherever the faith is, is a good thing, we can very easily be deceived.

So then, insufficient faith. Secondly, what does sufficient faith look like?

[13:11] Well, the chances are, you heard the following words the last time you went to a funeral. 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. They're the words of the Lord Jesus in verses 25 and 26.

And I wonder what your reaction was as you heard them, just read out just now. For some, I guess, it will sound too good to be true.

Pie in the sky when you die. Others, I guess, perhaps the majority of us, believe it. But I suspect that even as Christians, we can find ourselves asking, yeah, but is it really true?

I mean, death looks so final. It looks so hopeless. Are we simply denying reality? So let's have a look at these verses in a little bit more detail.

[14:20] And notice that firstly, Jesus promises resurrection life in the future. Jesus promises resurrection life in the future. Verse 25.

Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. Now here is the promise of physical resurrection life beyond the grave for those who believe in Jesus.

Now, in fact, Jesus has already taught about this glorious reality of resurrection beyond the grave back in John chapter 5. I put the verses there on the outline, so do either look there or turn back to John chapter 5, verses 28 and 29.

And let me read them for us. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Jesus is speaking about the final judgment day, the day of universal resurrection for everyone. Some will be raised to life, new physical life after death.

[15:45] Others will be raised to judgment. So can we see back in John chapter 11, verse 25, what Jesus is saying? Here is the promise on that judgment day of life rather than death and of heaven rather than hell.

But perhaps some of us are thinking, well, hang on a moment. How can we be sure? How can we be confident that Jesus can do it and pull off that thing? It's a big claim. Well, as we'll see next week, the raising of Lazarus from the dead is all the proof we need.

Have a look at verses 43 and 44. When Jesus had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go.

And the point is surely this, that just as Jesus can raise Lazarus back to physical life in this world, so we can be confident that he can also raise people to new physical life in the next world.

[17:13] It's why a friend of ours, some years ago, dying of cancer at the age of 30, very sad, and yet she was able to say, I just want to be there.

Now that is an extraordinary thing to say on your deathbed, a confidence, not in herself, but in the glorious promises of Jesus Christ.

But then secondly, notice that Jesus promises resurrection life in the present, verse 26. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Do you believe this? What I wanted to see is that Jesus is talking here about another dimension to resurrection life.

As he says that those who believe in him will never die. Now, clearly, he's not talking about physical death because he's just said in the previous verse that all will die.

[18:20] So turn back again to John chapter 5 or look at the verses again on the outline and to some verses in the previous paragraph, verses 24 and 25.

And as I read them, see if you can spot the surprise, John 5, 24 and 25. Truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.

Well, did you spot the surprise? In verse 25, Jesus doesn't say that those who believe in him will have eternal life but that they have eternal life.

Likewise, he doesn't say that those who believe in him will pass over from death to life but that they have already done so. In other words, Jesus is saying that, look, there are two spheres in which we can live in.

[19:37] We can live in the realm of spiritual life or we can live in the realm of spiritual death. All of us naturally live in the realm of spiritual death, living in God's world without reference to him.

We are cut off from him. We are under his judgment in this life and we face the judgment in the next, on the final day.

And yet, through his death on the cross, the penalty for sin has been paid such that we can be forgiven those who trust in him.

No longer under the judgment of God in this life, no longer facing the judgment in the next. Now, that is the glorious truth that lies at the very heart of the Christian faith.

And so, can we see what Jesus is saying here? That it's when we put our trust in him. It's at that point that we move from the realm of spiritual death to the realm of spiritual life.

[20:46] It's at that point that the crossover takes place. So, you see, here is the trick question. When does eternal life start for the Christian?

Well, not at the point of death, but at the point of believing in Jesus. In other words, eternal life, it's not like a pension pot that you set up and you put your money in the pension pot and then you can just forget about it until you're 65 or 70 or whenever you need it and yet has little bearing on life now in the present.

No, instead, it's that Jesus brings that verdict of the final judgment day into the present. There was an interview in the Sunday Times some years ago with the actor Bruce Willis as in the Die Hard films and explaining how he'd always longed to know what happens to you when you died.

A couple of years previously, he's died of cancer and this is how he described it. It was really painful. I loved my brother. I was in the room with my family when Robert died.

He was sliding away. I kept talking to him with the hope that he could hear me. I never knew if he did. And then later on towards the end of the interview he said, I was always up in the air about what happens when we die.

[22 : 19] Now, I was slightly struggling to imagine the hero of the Die Hard films being quite so full of angst but you see, how can we be certain about what happens when we die?

Well, can we see that Jesus shows us that it is simply a continuity of what has happened in this life? If we've rejected Jesus and ignored him in this life then that will be confirmed after our death and we will not see life.

But if we have life with God now through Jesus Christ through believing in him then we can be certain of life with God now in this life but supremely life with God in the next.

So back to John chapter 11 because notice finally Jesus' absolute insistence in verse 25 I am the resurrection and the life.

Imagine for the moment you're going to a funeral you expect kind words about the person who has died but instead the minister taking the funeral simply spends the whole time talking about himself.

[23 : 42] You see how extraordinary this is here is Martha she is in the depths of grief and loss and despair and Jesus preached the sermon about himself.

I am it's the Old Testament name for God the name by which God revealed himself to Moses Jesus is insistent I am the resurrection and the life just as Bill Gates perhaps might be able to claim I am Microsoft so associated is he with the company just as Mark Zuckerberg might be able to claim I am Facebook just as he is so associated with the company.

Jesus simply means I am so exclusively the provider of resurrection and eternal life and no one else is.

Now those who believe in him will recognize how spectacularly glorious and encouraging that is.

Others I guess will interpret Jesus' words as being scandalously egocentric.

No other religious leader has made such a claim. Notice Jesus doesn't simply say look I can get resurrection life for you he doesn't simply kind of vaguely promise it in some way he doesn't point to the person who can provide resurrection life no he himself is the resurrection and the life.

[25 : 25] What do you say what are the implications? Well surely what we need more than anything else when we are faced with death more than friendship more than a listening ear more than a shoulder to cry on is the reality of God himself.

God as he has spectacularly and definitively revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus enables us to face death with confidence.

Indeed I guess a good many of us will know those who have indeed done that who have faced death with confidence in Jesus and his promises because if we belong to him it means we can know now today what will happen to us then on that future day.

We can know now what the verdict will be when we die. Just think about that for a moment. if we belong to Jesus we have already crossed from death to life.

No more hoping for the best no more hoping that in some way our good deeds will outweigh the bad. No more faith as a leap in the dark. No more praying for the dead as if that might change people's destiny.

[26 : 55] No more purgatory or reincarnation. The idea that if you haven't quite made the grade in this life then you'll get another opportunity in the next. No you won't find that in the Bible.

Instead and very very wonderfully it is the decision we've made about Jesus in this life that determines whether or not we'll be raised to resurrection life in the next.

And therefore can we see how Jesus at a stroke he removes all the uncertainty and fear of death because he promises eternal life that starts now and continues into the future beyond the grave.

So let me finish just by asking the question that Jesus asks in verse 26 do you believe this? Let's have a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer.

Truly truly I say to you whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.

[28 : 16] Heavenly Father we praise you for these glorious promises of the Lord Jesus. thank you for his death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins.

Thank you for the confidence we can have in the face of death. It is as we believe in him in this life that we cross over from the realm of death to the realm of life.

Thank you that in him we can have confidence confidence and certainty in the face of death. And we pray for each one please would you help us to be those who have that confidence in him.

Please help us to grow in confidence in Jesus and his promises as we look at John chapter 11 over these four weeks. And we ask it in Jesus name.

Amen.