

Confidence in Easter

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[0 : 00] The reading is from John chapter 11, verse 45 to 57, starting from verse 45. 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.

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 only 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.

[1 : 23] 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 said 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 they might arrest him.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, thank you very much that you have made yourself known. Thank you that in Jesus the word has become flesh.

And we pray now as we hear his word explained. Please would you help us to take it to heart. Help us to grasp the confidence that we can have in the face of death.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is the fourth in our series of talks facing death with confidence.

[2 : 36] And today we're going to see exactly how it is that Jesus Christ can offer life after death. If you've been following the series, you'll know that in John chapter 11, Jesus' claim is that he alone can offer life with God now, which then continues after death.

It's there, if you look at it in John chapter 11, verses 25 and 26. 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. Those words were not said from the comfort of an armchair or from a pulpit, but at the funeral of one of Jesus' friends, Lazarus.

It is a staggering claim. And unless true, unless Jesus can deliver, there are, well, there are best empty words. And they are at worst a sick joke.

And yet we've seen the evidence as Jesus raises Lazarus back to life. He has been dead four days. And what happens?

[3 : 49] Verses 43 to 44. 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. As such, these are the word, 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 raises them to life in the next.

But of course, that begs the question, how is that possible? Because it's all too easy to have a vague hope in heaven without really ever being certain of it for ourselves.

Perhaps to speak of hope in heaven in the same way that we might say, I hope it's going to be a nice day today, which of course is really no more than wishful thinking.

And even those of us who do trust in Jesus, yet when faced with the reality of death, the fact that there could be life beyond the grave can surely seem a very long shot indeed.

[5 : 12] So we're going to see today that the key to being certain is to understand why Jesus died. Hence the title of this talk, Confidence in Easter.

Confidence in the events of that first Easter. Well, firstly, then our first point, the basis of confidence, the death of Jesus.

In verses 45 and 46 of John chapter 11, some of those who saw Jesus raise Lazarus, tell the Pharisees, the Jewish religious authorities.

Verse 45. 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 a meeting is called of the Samhedrin, the governing Jewish body, working under Roman occupation. John details the minutes of that meeting in verses 47 and 48.

[6 : 16] 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. The political situation is unstable. They're under Roman occupation.

They fear the consequences of a huge movement of people following Jesus. They want to guard their position as establishment figures. Now, no doubt they'd have loved to deny the miracles of Jesus and say that they couldn't happen.

But of course, that is the one thing they cannot do. And in particular, they can't deny the fact that Lazarus has been raised to life. It's a sobering thought for the skeptic today because there were also skeptics in the first century, those who would have loved to have been able to disprove the miracles of Jesus.

But of course, that is the one thing they cannot do. And therefore, that only option is to plot to kill him instead. Verse 53, so from that day on, they made plans to put him to death.

[7 : 35] And yet Jesus' death was far more than a simple act of political expediency. As verses 49 to 50 make clear, as Caiaphas, the high priest, stands up.

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.

And yet in saying those words, he is speaking far better than he knows. He is unwittingly acting as God's mouthpiece.

Verse 51, 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 with you how John, as he writes his gospel, he deliberately puts this prediction of the death of Jesus bang in the middle of the whole Lazarus narrative.

So all the way up to verse 44, we've been focusing on Lazarus. And then as we go into chapter 12, the focus is still on Lazarus as we see that the dinner party that is given in Jesus' honour, celebrating the fact that Lazarus is alive again.

[8 : 59] And yet John deliberately sandwiches this prediction of Jesus' death in the middle of the Lazarus story to show how it is that Jesus can offer eternal life.

It is through his death. As such, it is one of the clearest explanations in John's gospel of what Jesus' death accomplished.

And the key word is that little word for. In fact, it comes four times in verses 50 to 52. It means on behalf of, in the place of.

It is the language of substitution. And it's a word that John uses a lot in his gospel to describe and explain the death of Jesus.

The language of substitution and sacrifice, dying on behalf of others. It's because of Jesus' death on the cross that he can offer resurrection life.

[10 : 04] Because the death, because death is not, first and foremost, a biological problem. Yes, ageing takes place as we get older and as our cells become, become less good at regenerating themselves and eventually we die.

And yet above all, as we saw last week, death is a spiritual problem. It's the result of our sin. It's the result of God's judgment.

isn't it that in the face of death they really have no answers in fact there was a very porny article in the Guardian a couple of weeks ago asking whether COVID-19 will change us it began with the explanation as to how our modern world has been shaped by the belief that technology and science can outsmart and defeat death how our collective faith therefore is in the NHS or that the lockdown will work that a vaccine will be discovered faith in science faith in the experts and the article went on will the current pandemic change human attitudes to death it concluded somewhat wistfully probably not this is what the article said in all likelihood it will be that we simply need to have more hospitals more doctors more nurses we need to stockpile more respiratory machines more protective gear more testing kits we need to invest more money in researching and developing novel treatments we should not be caught off guard again the article ends reminded of its fragility our civilization will simply react by building stronger defenses and yet surely COVID-19 should change us both as a nation but also individually now that's not to say that good health care and scientific research aren't great blessings they are and we're wonderfully fortunate to live in a country which has those things but clearly they have their limitations limitations at the point of death after all each one of us will die perhaps we should learn from previous generations who would have regarded a time like this yes a time of great hardship also at a time of opportunity just listen to J.C.

Ryle the former 19th century bishop of Liverpool sickness is no sign that God is displeased with us it is generally sent for the good of our souls it tends to draw our affections away from this world and to direct them to things above it sends us to our Bibles and teaches us to pray better it helps to prove our faith and patience and shows us the real value of hope in Christ it reminds us that we are not to live always in our secular culture death is the elephant in the room we've managed to tuck it away in a corner somewhere so that for most of the time we hardly even know it's there and yet what has happened over these last couple of months well the elephant is now bang in the middle of the room we can't avoid it and surely that is a good thing and therefore you see as we see these different responses to Jesus in John chapter 11 it raises the question of what we believe because remember this is why

John is writing just turn on to John chapter 20 verses 30 and 31 it's what we looked at in the first talk in the series John chapter 20 verse 30 now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book we've seen one sign but the greatest sign apart from Jesus' own resurrection from the dead if Jesus raised Lazarus then surely he could also turn water into wine he could heal the lame he could cure the blind he could feed 5,000 people he could walk on water John goes on verse 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name Jesus is the Christ he is God's King he is the Son he is God's appointed ruler and judge now of course it's possible to have a smaller view of Jesus than that

[22 : 15] Jesus just a teacher Jesus just a miracle worker but you won't find any evidence in the New Testament for a Jesus who was only those things and he's the one who gives life forgiveness and life with God in this world life with God in the next John writes so that we may believe in him the word has the sense of both coming to believe in him but then ongoing growing in our belief in him continuing to believe in him I guess for many of us who do believe in Jesus John chapter 11 will have grown our confidence in Jesus and especially in the face of death as we've come face to face with Jesus as we've been reminded of why it is that death is so terrible as we've seen the precious promises of Jesus in the face of death and as we've seen that it's through his death on the cross that we can have the life that John talks about but I hope too that it's given us confidence to speak to others graciously compassionately but also with a crystal clarity and an urgency there was an article in the paper a couple of weeks ago by author and Brixton resident

Tom Holland he was lamenting the failure of the mainstream Christian denominations in this country to speak about the hope that we can have in Jesus he wrote this rather than speaking with a voice of prophecy rather than explaining to a grieving and anxious people how the dead will raise into the blaze of eternal life rather than proclaiming the miracles and mysteries that they uniquely exist to proclaim church leaders seem to have opted instead to talk like middle managers they need to recapture their confidence and it may well be that some of us need to do the same but there will be others and we have never put our trust in Jesus in the words of Jesus we never believed in him we've never been born again and yet can we see how vital a right response to

Jesus is I often have conversations with people who at one level they accept the teaching of Jesus and yet they won't do anything about it they put it off for a moment in life when things are less busy when there's a more opportune time and yet if now isn't that moment when we are surrounded by death all around us when will the time come someone said to me recently I know I need to follow Jesus and put my trust in him but I just need to get my will sorted out first well to which the obvious reply is and this is what I said to him getting our affairs in order in the next world is far more important than getting our affairs in order in this world so I want to finish this series of talks in John chapter 11 by praying a prayer prayer that you can pray and you can echo in your own heart if you want to put your trust in

Jesus Christ if you want to receive for yourself the life with God for which he died let me read the prayer through once and you can see for yourself if this is the kind of prayer that you would like to pray I'll then read it through a second time at which point you can then make the prayer your own this is the prayer Lord God I am sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart soul mind and strength I understand now who Jesus is and why he died I know that I do not deserve it but because of Jesus death on the cross for me I ask you to forgive me from now on please give me the desire to obey you and help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost amen well if that is a prayer that you would like to say in your own heart I'm going to pray it again and you can do precisely that let me lead us in the prayer

Lord God I am sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart soul mind and strength I understand now who Jesus is and why he died I know that I do not deserve it but because of Jesus death on the cross for me I ask you to forgive me from now on please give me the desire to obey you and help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost amen let me just say that if you've prayed that prayer for the first time it is precisely the kind of prayer that God loves to answer do tell a Christian friend what you've done or get in touch with me we'd love you to to get the best possible start that you can in the Christian life and following Jesus and do keep joining us at Grace Church online each week as we listen to

[28 : 05] God's word the Bible let me finish by praying I am the resurrection and the life heavenly father we pray to you for this glorious promise that lies at the heart of this chapter thank you that John records it for us as he writes his gospel to bring people to belief in Jesus and to grow those who have believed in him in their belief and we pray that that would indeed be the case for each one of us a confidence in Jesus Christ in the face of death confident to believe it for ourselves confident to live it and proclaim it to others and we ask it in Jesus name Amen out and you you