

(2) Life – for certain

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[0 : 0 0] The reading is taken from John chapter 11, starting to read at verse 17, and that can be found on page 1082. So John chapter 11 from verse 17.

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. 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.

[1 : 1 2] 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.

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?

[2 : 3 0] 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? 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 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.

Vicki, thanks very much for reading to us. Let me add my welcome to you this morning. It's very good to have you with us through a number away, first of Easter holidays and that kind of thing.

[3 : 40] But it's very good to those who are here. Well, we're continuing our series in John chapter 11, where we left off last week. And we're going to work through John chapters 11 and 12 over the next few weeks.

So do please keep the Bible open at 1082. Now, the chances are that the last time you went to a funeral, that you heard the following words, 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 will never die. Now, the words of Jesus, we just had them read to us from John chapter 11.

And I wonder what your reaction was this morning as you heard them. I guess for some of us, our immediate reaction to those words is simply to think, well, look, it's too good to be true. It's just pie in the sky when you die.

I guess for others, our immediate reaction would be to say, yes, I do believe that. But I suspect that even as Christians, we can find ourselves asking the question, well, is it really true?

[4 : 49] After all, death looks so final, death looks so hopeless. Are we simply denying reality? I've read recently of an American who's devised a foolproof plan to ensure that his relatives come to visit his grave after his death.

Grover Chestnut is his name. He's from Montana. And he's left instructions for an automatic cash machine to be installed in his headstone. The machine will be programmed to dispense \$300 a week to each of his heirs as they come and visit.

It's rather an intriguing concept. I can't say I thought of doing that myself. But there is a man clearly desperate for his influence to continue after his death.

He can't bear the thought that actually one day it's all going to come to an end. But last week, if you were here, we saw, didn't we, the death is final, which is why it is such good news that we also saw that Jesus defeats the two greatest enemies that we face, that he defeats the power of death and he defeats the power of sin.

Do listen to that talk online if you missed it. Well, this week, we're going to see what that looks like in practice and what it really means. The aim of today's talk is to give us absolute confidence in these words of Jesus when he says, I am the resurrection, the life, whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.

[6 : 25] Because even as Christians, it seems to me it's easy to have a kind of vague belief in the resurrection without ever being absolutely certain about it.

Now, we're going to focus mainly on verses 25 and 26 this morning, if you just have a look at those verses again. You see, Jesus makes two claims, the claims will be the resurrection and the claim to be the life and he explains what each of those means.

He explains what it means for him to be the resurrection in verse 25 and the life in verse 26. First of all then, Jesus Christ promises life in the future.

If you want to follow the outline, then you'll find it on the reverse side of the service sheet. Jesus Christ promises life in the future. And perhaps the best way to explain what Jesus means when he says I am the resurrection is to begin by looking back to John chapter 5 which I've put there on the outline.

Because the writers of the gospel don't write what we might call a kind of holiday scrapbook account of Jesus. They don't kind of think, well, you know, here's a kind of random healing here, a bit of teaching here, something else which we remember here.

[7 : 38] We'll kind of put it all together just in the same way that you might do when you're writing a holiday scrapbook, something like that. Now, these are carefully ordered documents and therefore, obviously, John assumes as he writes chapter 11 that we have read and understood what he's written earlier in chapter 5.

So have a look then at John 5, 28 and 29. As Jesus says, Now, Jesus is talking about the final judgment day, the day of universal resurrection for everyone, when some will be raised to life, others will be raised to judgment.

And so can we see back in John chapter 11 what Jesus is saying in verse 25 as he says, I am the resurrection and the life.

Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. You see, here is the promise that on that judgment day, here is the promise of life rather than death and of heaven rather than hell.

But you say, how can I be certain there will be a judgment day? This is the 21st century after all. Well, for conclusive evidence of that, we need to look to the resurrection of Jesus himself from the dead.

[9 : 22] So I put Acts chapter 17 on the outline where the apostle Paul shows us what the resurrection of Jesus demonstrates. Just follow his logic with me.

God commands all people everywhere to repent for he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

Now, there is good evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. It's been described as one of the best attested facts of history. And what is it the resurrection demonstrates? Well, have a look at Acts 17 again.

You see, it demonstrates that there will be a judgment and that Jesus is going to be the judge. And therefore, back in John chapter 11, can we see the wonderful promise that on that day, those who have believed in Jesus will be raised up to resurrection life.

They will die, yes, but they'll be raised to resurrection life with God in heaven. And the raising of Lazarus to life is all the proof we need to convince us that Jesus is serious when he says that.

[10 : 46] You see, look again at verses 43 to 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, his face wrapped with a cloth.

Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go. Lazarus is the best visual aid you could ever come across. And the point is that just as Jesus raised Lazarus to physical life in this world, so we have to be confident that Jesus can raise men and women, those who trust in him, to life in the next world and give them resurrection life after death.

In fact, verse 43 anticipates what Jesus will say to anyone who has put their trust in him after they have died. As he says to each one, come out and they'll be brought to resurrection life.

James, Sarah, Richard, Fiona, come out to resurrection life. I am the resurrection. It's an extraordinarily bold claim, isn't it?

No other religious leader has ever made such a claim. Jesus doesn't say that he procures resurrection or that he promises or that he simply points to the one who can deliver it. Rather, he himself is the resurrection.

[12 : 19] So let me ask you the question that Jesus asks of all of us in verse 26. Do you believe this? can you insert your name in verse 25?

I am the resurrection and the life. Simon Dowdy who believes in Jesus will live even though he dies. that's why a friend of ours dying of cancer at the age of 30 four years ago, trusting in Jesus, was able to say, I just want to be that.

It's an extraordinary thing, isn't it, to say, on your deathbed, to be that confident of resurrection after death. I take it these words of Jesus show us the folly of praying for the dead or anointing the dying with oil, as if either of those things will change their destiny.

I still remember being in a church service, actually, where the dead were prayed for, and a friend of mine said in a fairly quiet voice, but nonetheless just loud enough to be heard by everyone, it's too late.

And he was right, because clearly the issue for each one of us as we read these words of Jesus here is have we believed in Jesus in this life?

[13 : 40] It means, of course, there's no such place as purgatory. The idea that you can somehow pay off your sins in purgatory is totally contrary to the teaching of Jesus in the Bible, as is the idea of reincarnation, the idea that if you haven't quite made the grade in this life, then you get another chance to do so in the next.

next. No, it's the decision that we make about Jesus in this life that determines whether or not we'll be raised in the next. And therefore, verse 25 is wonderful, isn't it?

Because at a stroke, you see, Jesus removes all the uncertainty and fear of death because he promises life in the future, resurrection life, to those whose trust is in him.

So next time you find yourself asking the question, will Christians really be raised to resurrection life?

Will it really happen or is it just too good to be true? Then will you consider Lazarus? If Jesus can bring the dead back to life in this world, then he can raise the dead to life in the next as well.

[14 : 53] So that's our first point this morning, Jesus Christ promises life in the future. But secondly, Jesus Christ promises life in the present, and now we're going to focus on verse 26.

Because here you see, Jesus explains what it means when he says that he is the life. And the point is, it's not like a sort of pension fund that we set up and then kind of forget about it until we retire many years into the future, when we're 65 or 70 or even 80, perhaps as things are going at the moment, but has little bearing on our lives in the present.

Now, it is rather that Jesus brings the verdict of that final judgment day into the present. You see, have a look at John 5, verse 24, on the outline.

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has crossed over from death to life.

I wonder if we can see there that Jesus is saying that there are two spheres or two realms in which we can live our lives, the realm of life or the realm of death.

[16 : 15] As we saw last week, all of us are naturally in the realm of death, living in God's world, without reference to him, under his judgments. But notice that Jesus is saying there in John 5 that at the moment we put our trust in him, it is at that point that we move, that we transfer from the realm of death to the realm of life.

it is at that point that the crossover between the two happens. And therefore when you look again at Jesus' explanation in John 11 of what it means for him to be the life.

Second half of verse 25, 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? Now, Jesus here is clearly not saying that those who believe in him will never die physically. Clearly, they will, verse 25, whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.

But, verse 26, everyone who believes in me will never die, in the sense that they won't then face the judgment, in the sense that they have already been transferred from the realm of spiritual death to the realm of spiritual life.

[17 : 42] And therefore, the life with God that they've begun to enjoy in this life will simply continue into the next. Christ. It's rather like the experience, perhaps, of the engaged couple.

As soon as the newly engaged couple get engaged, everything changes. Their whole focus in life suddenly moves to the future day, when they'll finally be married, and the relationship will be consummated.

Well, suddenly, the Christian enters into life with God the moment they put their trust in Jesus. And then, from then on, they're looking forward to that final day, when the relationship will be consummated, or confirmed, so to speak, in life with God beyond the grave.

And once again, if we're in any doubt at all, then Lazarus is the vital and wonderful visual aid of this reality.

You see, the raising of Lazarus to physical life in this world is a picture of what happens to anyone the moment they put their trust in Jesus, as we move from the realm of spiritual death under God's judgments, to the realm of spiritual life.

[19 : 06] I read recently of an interview in the Sunday Times with the actor Bruce Willis, and he was explaining his longing to know what would happen when someone died.

He was explaining that a few years previously his brother had died of cancer. He said it was really painful. I love 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 later on in the interview, he said, I was always up in the air, and still am, about what happens when we die.

die. Well, I must say, I thought the interview was fairly unconvincing. I couldn't imagine the hero of the die-hard films being quite so full of angst about anything. But you see, how can we be certain about what happens when we die?

Well, aren't these words of Jesus wonderful? Jesus says it will simply be a continuity of what has begun to happen in this life. In other words, if we've rejected Jesus and ignored him, then that will be confirmed at the point of death and we will not see life.

[20 : 17] But if we have life with God now in Jesus through believing in him, then we can be certain of life with God in heaven.

And again, we need to ask ourselves the question that Jesus asks in verse 26. Do you believe this? And to help us with that, I want to see how this teaching of Jesus tackles what I think is a very British superstition.

And it is the idea that I can ignore Jesus in this life, he can be irrelevant to my family life, my business life, my ambitions, my priorities and so on, but then I can take great comfort in promises such as this at a funeral.

It's a fairly common thing that, isn't it? I think as a family kind of gather around the graveside of a relative, they don't look at all to Jesus in the rest of their lives, but at the funeral they take great comfort from these words in John 11 and they console themselves with the thought that granny or whoever it is has gone to a better place.

But of course that is simply superstition. That is simply wishful thinking. Unless granny believed and trusted in Jesus, unless she had moved during her lifetime from the realm of spiritual death to the realm of spiritual life.

[21 : 42] What's war, of course, it shows, doesn't it, the bankruptcy of a worldview that actually has nothing to say in the face of death. Jesus, you see, is not like the AA man who we can safely ignore until the car breaks down.

Jesus comes to offer us life with God now. If we reject that offer of life, then we will not see life beyond the grave. But it also, of course, wonderfully explains why Christians can be so certain in the face of death.

Because they have life with God now. There is a continuity between this life and the next. Jesus makes the most extraordinary claims, doesn't he?

No other religious leader has come remotely close to the kind of claims that Jesus Christ makes. Just look at those verses again that we've been looking at, 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.

[22 : 59] And it's that which explains the total change that happens in this chapter, in what Martha, one of Lazarus' sisters, believes. I wonder if you noticed that change as Vicki read the passage to us.

you see, have a look at verses 21 and 22 and see what it was that Martha started off believing. Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died.

But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. She seems to recognize, doesn't she, that Jesus is some kind of healer, that God is with him in some way.

It seems in verse 24 that she has some vague kind of belief in life after death as she says, I know that he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.

But it's very vague, isn't it? It's what you sometimes hear people saying, isn't it, at a funeral, they've gone to a better place, a kind of vague belief in life after death.

[24 : 02] But what is Martha saying by verse 27? Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

By verse 27, she recognizes that Jesus is the Christ, that he is God's King. She recognizes that Jesus is God's Son, the one through whom God speaks.

You see, Jesus' aim in teaching Martha is to move her, from this rather kind of abstract, distant faith in Jesus, uncertain belief about what happens in the last day, to a personal belief in Jesus, that believes and fully trusts in him, and is certain of life on that future day.

And that is precisely what Jesus wants to do with all of us here this morning. And in case we're in any doubt, the evidence that this really happened as a real event, again, is very strong, isn't it?

You see, look on to verse 45 and see how it's publicly acknowledged. Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in Jesus.

[25 : 20] But more compelling still is that Jesus' enemies understood precisely what had happened. You see, have a look on to chapter 12 verses 9 to 11.

And here at the celebration meal that was given in honour of Jesus, in honour of him having raised Lazarus from the dead. It's chapter 12 verse 9. When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him, many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. Now I wonder if you can see what has happened by the middle of John chapter 12 here.

The news of the miracle has spread far and wide, people are believing in Jesus left, right and centre and the authorities are worried. And because they can't bury the evidence, they decide to kill it.

It is the greatest act of desperation, isn't it, when you have to kill your prime witness. Because of course there's nothing else they could do. If Jesus hadn't raised Lazarus to life, if Lazarus was still dead, no doubt they'd have found the body and they'd have paraded it all the way through the streets, demonstrating what a fraud Jesus was.

[26 : 45] But no, Lazarus is alive, everyone can see it. And so in their desperation the anything they can do is to kill him. People in the first century were not fools.

They were far more familiar with death than we are in our sanitized culture. If Jesus hadn't raised Lazarus, everyone would have known about it, and John would simply not have been able to write this and get away with it.

I am the resurrection and the life, says Jesus. Well, is that what you believe? because clearly it's only when we have that personal belief in Jesus that these words can be said at our own funerals with any real sense of conviction.

God is going to lead us in prayer. We usually have a question time here at Grace Church. Questions aren't compulsory, but you're very welcome to ask a question if you would like to, and we can take questions after that.

So let's pray together. when Jesus had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

[28 : 13] 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.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for this wonderful chapter. Thank you for the extraordinary way in which we see the authority of the Lord Jesus and supremely over death.

Thank you that Lazarus is a visual aid of what will happen to all those who have died trusting in Jesus as they are raised to life, not in this world, but in the next.

And we pray, therefore, Heavenly Father, you help all of us to grow in our belief that Jesus is indeed the resurrection and the life, and to live our lives now confidently in the light of that promise.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.