

(2) Equal with God

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[0 : 00] Today we're reading from the book of John, chapter 5, verses 19 to 29, and you'll find that on page 10073 of the book Q Bibles.

That's John chapter 5, verses 19 to 29. So Jesus said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing.

For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing.

And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.

The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.

[1 : 03] Whoever does not honor the Son, does not honor the Father who sent him. 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. 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.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

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.

Thanks, Lizzie, very much indeed for reading. Let me add my welcome to you this morning, as we continue our series looking at John 5, so it would be good to keep the Bibles open in front of us.

[2 : 21] Now, if you believe everything you read in the newspapers, you will know that the actress Dawn French is worried about dying.

She is preparing for death, she tells us in a recent interview. Apparently, she has always thought she would die young, and now with her 50th birthday on the horizon, she believes she is running out of time.

So this month, she is moving to Cornwall to write her memoirs and to die, as she puts it, slowly and nicely, in great surroundings with my family.

But perhaps the most important thing that Dawn French would want to know is what will happen to her when she has died. It's a question, of course, all of us should ask. Indeed, we'd be fools not to be asking that question.

And that is the thrust of this next section in John 5. We're looking today at verses 24 to 29, where Jesus says that we can know what will happen to us when we die.

[3 : 31] In fact, that all of us will leave church this morning, knowing exactly what would happen to us if we were to be run over by a bus this afternoon. Now, my prayer is that for some of us, this will give us real confidence and great assurance.

For others, perhaps it will knock our complacency, and perhaps some of the platitudes that we can so easily find ourselves falling into. Now, we saw last week, as we looked at the first part of John 5, that Jesus healed a man who was paralysed, and he did so on the Sabbath.

And by doing so, he made the unmistakable claim that he is equal with God. Have a look at verse 18 with me.

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own father, making himself equal with God.

Indeed, he went on to say that he does what God does, that he is the one who gives life, that he is the one who judges. And so in this next section, he expands on what it means for him to be the life giver and the judge.

[4 : 53] So as we think about that together, why don't we pray, and why don't we ask God to help us and to be our teacher this morning as we look at his word. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, thank you very much that we have this record of Jesus' teaching before us.

And we pray as we think about Jesus as the life giver and the judge, how we can be certain of life in heaven, in the new heavens and the new earth. Please would you teach us this morning.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now one of the important principles for looking at any Bible passage is look for repeated themes and phrases, because they often help us to get to the heart of what the passage is about.

And you'll see that is exactly what happens in our passage here. So if you look at verse 25, we see Jesus saying, truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here.

Which is very similar to what Jesus goes on to say in verse 28, as he says, an hour is coming. The difference you'll notice is that in verse 25, Jesus speaks about a time that has already arrived.

[6 : 10] In verse 28, he's speaking about a time which is still in the future. In other words, in this passage here, Jesus is speaking about two time periods, two periods of time.

In verse 24 to 27, he speaks a time that was promised but has now arrived. In verses 28 to 30, he speaks about a future time which is still yet to come.

Now it's important to be clear about those two time periods because the heart of what Jesus is teaching here has to do with those two time periods and it is this, that our decision about Jesus Christ in the present determines Jesus' decision about us in the future.

And I've tried to reflect that on the headings, on the outline. You might like to turn to the outline. So two headings this morning and then afterwards, as usual, we'll take questions.

First of all then, our decision about Jesus in the present. Now I wonder if you've noticed the huge surprise here in verse 24.

[7 : 24] Just have a look at verse 24 again. 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.

Notice what Jesus doesn't say. He doesn't say, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me will have eternal life. Nor does he say, he will pass from death to life.

Notice that whoever hears Jesus' words and believes in him has eternal life now and has already passed from death to life.

You've probably seen the slogan that Christian aid run under their adverts, we believe in life before death.

It's a deliberate parody, I take it, of what Christians are often thought to be saying, which is that eternal life starts when we die. But no, Jesus says that eternal life, look at it, verse 24, starts the moment we come to believe in him.

[8 : 34] In other words, for those who hear Jesus' words and believe in him, eternal life is not simply some future dream, rather eternal life is present reality.

It starts here now and goes on into the future in the new heavens and the new earth. But then the other surprise in verse 24 is that phrase he has passed from death to life.

Jesus assumes that our natural state is death, that naturally we are spiritually dead. That is the starting point, if you like, that all of us are spiritually dead, we are not alive to God, we are by nature rebels against him.

Living in this world, yet refusing to have God as God over us and so facing condemnation. But, says Jesus, if you hear my words, if you believe him who sent me, you've crossed over from the realm of spiritual death to the realm of spiritual life.

Why? Is that so? Well, have a look at verse 25. It is the case because now we live in the age when the spiritually dead, those who hear the voice of Jesus, those who believe in him, can live.

[9 : 57] And therefore, I hope we can see that Jesus is saying that we can be confident now in this world of what our destiny will be in the next. We can know now that we'll be in heaven then.

In other words, you see, Jesus removes at a stroke that dreadful uncertainty for ever thinking, will I make it to heaven or not? How can we be so sure?

Well, because according to Jesus, whether or not we have eternal life doesn't depend on our merit or being good enough. No, verse 24, it depends on hearing Jesus' words and believing him.

That is how the spiritually dead are raised. That is how we cross over from the realm of death to the realm of life. After all, verse 26, Jesus is the life giver.

He has, as he puts it, life in himself. Indeed, in John chapter 11, just before he raises Lazarus from the dead, he says that he is the life.

[11 : 08] In other words, in this universe in which we live, Jesus Christ has exclusive power over life and death. And therefore, these are wonderful verses, aren't they?

As Jesus says, we can be certain now about whether we have eternal life or not. The issue is simply have we listened to the teaching of Jesus Christ?

Have we believed in him and personally put our trust in him? So, clearly, for what Jesus is saying here, it's not enough to have some kind of vague belief in God, as so many think and assume in our nation.

It's not enough, clearly, to consider ourselves vaguely to be Christian. Because only Jesus can bring us to God. He alone is the life giver. Indeed, he died on the cross so that those who trust in him can be confident of forgiveness and of life, spiritual life.

Only Jesus can bring us to God. Every other path leads to spiritual death. And of course, all of us know, don't we, whether we have put our trust in Jesus Christ.

[12 : 24] All of us know whether, to use the words of Jesus, we have heard his voice and believed in him. If we have, I hope we can see these words of Jesus give us terrific confidence this morning.

That we have crossed over from the realm of spiritual death to the realm of spiritual life. That we are already enjoying eternal life.

But of course, it may be that we find this language of being certain of eternal life very arrogant. Or perhaps, one or two in the back of our minds, we doubt what Jesus says here.

And therefore, it's really important that we see who it is that Jesus is as he makes these claims. Notice, first of all, in verse 25, he's the Son of God.

Which is an echo of what we saw last week in verses 17 and 18 as Jesus claimed to be equal with God as he claimed that God was his Father.

[13 : 25] Jesus claims equality with God. The one who at a time of creation brought life into being simply by speaking.

And therefore, of course, he can give eternal life. He's not being arrogant to say that. It is simply matter of fact that he can do so. But notice too that Jesus says in verse 27 that he's the Son of Man.

Now, we're given a description of the Son of Man earlier in the Bible in Daniel chapter 7 which I printed on the outline.

In Daniel chapter 7 where we are first introduced to the Son of Man type figure. Let me just read it for us. Here's the vision that Daniel had.

In my vision at night I looked and there before me was one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days that's God himself and was led into his presence.

[14 : 30] He was given authority, glory and sovereign power. All peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

I hope we can see there the Son of Man is the one to whom God has given all authority over all people and done so for all time. He is a man, the Son of Man yet he has all the characteristics of God himself and has given authority over an everlasting kingdom.

And therefore you see when Jesus says that whoever hears my word and believes him and believes in him has eternal life. He's not like some sort of backbench MP who jumps up in the House of Commons and after all the recent speculation about whether or not Gordon Brown will call an election he says I know when the election will be.

And we might think well how do you know? It's not your call. It's the Prime Minister's prerogative to make that kind of decision. Well in a similar way, in a far greater way, Jesus is the Son of God, he is fully God and he is the Son of Man, he is the Judge, the Life Giver, the one with exclusive power over life and death in our universe.

It's his call, which is why whoever hears his words and believes in him has eternal life. So that's our first point, our decision about Jesus in the present.

[16 : 16] Secondly, our decision about Jesus in the present determines Jesus' decision about us in the future. And before we go on, David, would you mind just opening the doors?

I think it's getting a bit hot for one or two in here, so just be good to get a breath of air coming through. Our decision about Jesus in the present determines Jesus' decision about us in the future.

Because in verses 28 to 30, Jesus goes on to talk about the future. Have a look at verse 28. 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, those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. You see, it is a terrible mistake to assume that this world is all there is.

Notice Jesus says there will be a judgment and there will be a hell. If you've been to the town of Orvieto in central Italy, you'll know, I imagine, you'll have seen the wonderful medieval cathedral.

[17 : 32] It's a wonderful building. And the front of which is divided in two. On one side, there are stone carvings depicting heaven. And on the other side are stone carvings depicting hell and judgments.

And we often hear people saying, don't we, something like the fact that the church's understanding of heaven and hell is really no more than a product of the medieval imagination and the medieval mindset.

Well, here in John chapter 5, this is Jesus speaking, not the medieval imagination. Verse 27, this is the words of Jesus who is the one with authority to judge.

So, notice first of all that Jesus says that judgment day will be unavoidable. Verse 28, all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out.

Unlike now, when we can turn a deaf ear to the words of Jesus, when we can say it's not convenient to consider his claims, why then, it will be different. And notice too that Jesus says the judgment will be fair.

[18 : 47] Verse 30, over the page. My judgment is just. Any miscarriage of judgment is an awful thing, isn't it?

And how much worse it would be on that final day when the judgment is final. But Jesus says his judgment is just. There will be no one in hell who will be able to say it is not fair.

But the heart of what Jesus teaches in these two verses is that the basis of judgment will be what we have done. Verse 30, those who have done good will be raised to the resurrection of life.

Sorry, verse 29, those who have done good will be raised to the resurrection of life. Those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. will be raised to the resurrection of the resurrection. So how will I know where I stand on that day?

Will the bad I've done in some way be able to sort of outweigh the good I've done? Or the other way around perhaps? Well it might sound a bit like it, mightn't it, from what Jesus says there.

[19 : 57] Well one of the other principles we need to bear in mind for interpreting the Bible is that we need to interpret scripture by scripture. In other words we need to ask the question within John's gospel. What does John mean when he talks about doing good in verse 29?

What does John mean when he talks about doing evil in verse 29? Well I put on the outline John 3 verses 19 and 20 which shows what is meant when Jesus talks about those who do evil.

Just have a look at those verses with me. Jesus is talking about himself as the light and he says this. This is the verdict. Light has come into the world but men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. Can we see that for Jesus doing evil means refusing to accept the light of God as we have it in Jesus?

Or to use the language of John 5 verse 24 it is refusing to listen to Jesus and refusing to come to him. Refusing to do so because John 3 verse 19 it is life changing.

[21 : 18] Men love darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. I guess that would describe some we know may describe one or two of us.

We know that if we began to follow Jesus actually it would have an impact on our lives. It would change our relationships or our work life or the way we use our money.

It would change the whole focus of our lives. And we don't like it. We don't like the idea of God interfering with our lives. Well that says Jesus is evil. And to reject Jesus like that will affect our destiny.

So then what does it mean to be good? Well Jesus tells us later on in John 6 which again is on the outline when Jesus is asked what must we do to do the works God requires?

Jesus answered the work of God is this to believe in the one he has sent. And that you see is why the judgment is in Jesus' hands.

[22 : 25] Because everything depends on our relationship with him and our attitude to him in this life. How do I know where I'll stand with Jesus in the next life?

Well it's simple. I'll stand with him in the next life in exactly the same place I've stood with him in this life. Let me try to illustrate what Jesus is teaching here with an illustration from the Rugby World Cup.

Just imagine that several months ago you decided to get tickets for the final in Paris on October the 20th. They cost you an arm and a leg but you managed to get them nonetheless and you're delighted to have done so.

But for the time being even so the final will be upon us in six weeks time it's impossible to tell now simply by looking around a room like this or looking on a crowded tube train tomorrow morning.

It's impossible to tell simply by looking at people who has tickets for the final and who doesn't. Who will be there and who won't be there. However in six weeks time of course the difference between those with tickets and those without tickets couldn't be clearer could it?

[23 : 39] Those with tickets you'll hop on the Eurostar you'll go to the Stade de France you'll present your tickets and you'll be let in. While those without tickets will have to stay on the other side of the gates and probably if they have any sense on the other side of the channel.

But the point is of course that the decision you see you had made in the past to buy your tickets why the fruit of that the result of that decision will only be seen then in the future.

And Jesus is saying that in the same way the decision that we make about him now is simply confirmed on that final judgment day. Now clearly the illustration doesn't quite work because Jesus is saying if we've believed in him we've already entered eternal life.

But it does make the point that it's my decision about Jesus now that determines his decision about me on that final day. Because of course it's the crossover from spiritual death to spiritual life takes place when we put our trust in Jesus.

That is when the real change takes place. And therefore if we have believed in Jesus it gives us real confidence doesn't it that we have eternal life now. Yes we'll have it on the final day in the new heavens and the new earth but it's begun now in this life.

[25 : 07] Death is an awful thing isn't it? The five year old boy of some friends of ours died ten days ago. A neighbour is at death's door and a close relative has a terminal illness.

But if we are Christians we know the life giver and that will be confirmed on the judgement day. And notice verse 28 that on that day it is to new physical life that we will be raised.

Not kind of floating around as disembodied spirits but physical resurrection life. death. I think of a man called Mark Ruston who was the vicar of a church in Cambridge for many years.

He was a very godly man and had a profound effect on many, many people over many years as a vicar of a church in central Cambridge. His last years were once a struggle against cancer and he actually faced his certain death with the humble confidence of a man who knew that death could not hold him.

He knew it would just be the beginning. And in his dying days he wrote this to a friend. I cannot honestly say he wrote that I'm looking forward to the last bit of the journey but beyond that I know that I shall see Christ and what could compare with that.

[26 : 35] God. Well let me ask, is that your confidence this morning? If not, I hope we can see the urgency of hearing Jesus and believing in him.

It's so easy isn't it to think, well I just put the decision off. But Jesus is saying if we haven't entered into eternal life before death, there is no chance that we will do so after death.

there is no point praying for the dead. It is too late by then. You see God is very gracious, isn't he? In Jesus he tells us the answer to the most pressing question we could ask.

What happens when I die? He lovingly warns us there will be a judgment. He lovingly tells us the basis of the judgment. He pleads with us to listen to Jesus and believe in him.

because our decision about Jesus now determines Jesus' decision about us on that future day. Well why don't we spend a few moments in quiet, I'll then pray and then we have time for questions if anyone would like to ask a question.

[27 : 56] 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.

Heavenly Father, we praise you that the Lord Jesus is the life giver, that he has life in himself, that he is life. And therefore, thank you for these wonderful words of confidence and encouragement that whoever hears his words and believes in him has already passed from death to life and does not come into judgment.

We pray, Heavenly Father, that you would give us great confidence in these words of Jesus and in the reality of eternal life now.

Thank you for the confidence it gives us for this life and for the next. Amen.