

Life in the Face of Death

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- [0:00] Well, I'm not sure if you've heard the old story of a man walking along a cliff top on a narrow path when he slipped over the edge of the cliff. And though he as he fell, he managed to grab a branch sticking out of the side of the cliff.
- And as he was holding on for dear life, he called out, is anyone up there? Surprisingly, an answer came. Yes, I am. Who is that? The man replied. It is Jesus.
- Oh, Jesus, the man said, can you please help me? To which Jesus replied, do you believe in me? Oh, absolutely, said the man. And then Jesus said, well, then let go of the branch.
- What? And Jesus repeated himself, your life won't end in death. So let go of the branch. And then after a long pause, the man responded, is anyone else up there?
- Well, as we begin with John's gospel, let me remind you that it's all about really believing in Jesus. And we know that from the purpose statement, which is actually in small print in the graphic there.
- [1:07] But I've got it here on the next slide. It's at the end of John's gospel. And it says that Jesus performed many miraculous signs. And these are written down that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.
- And that by believing you may have life in his name. And so the raising of Lazarus today is another miraculous.
- In fact, it's the last one that Jesus performs before his own resurrection. And it, too, is meant to help us believe in Jesus and the life that we can have in his name.
- And we need this, don't we? And we need life in the face of death. Death, because death is something we all face. In fact, sadly, some of us here this morning have already faced it with the death of a loved one.
- And some of us amongst our church are even, in fact, facing it themselves. And so this chapter is meant to help us believe in Jesus as the one who brings life in the face of death.
- [2:16] Such that we'll be content to let go of the branch when the time comes for him to say so. Well, let's pick it up. The story in chapter 11, verse 1 and point 1.
- So John chapter 11. Not Luke chapter 11, where I am. John chapter 11. Now, a man named Lazarus was sick.
- He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.
- So the sister sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick. And notice here for a moment that verse 2, John includes this little side note about Mary.
- It's different to what we heard a couple of weeks ago with Vijay from Luke chapter 7, with the anointing of the sinful woman. This is a different person, though, doing a similar thing. And we learn next week that the anointing is to prepare Jesus for his burial, his death.

[3 : 18] But the question is, why does John put it here in chapter 11 when the readers haven't even read it yet? It happens next week in chapter 12. Well, perhaps it was already a well-known story.

And so he could put it here without us having read it yet. But perhaps when we do read it, we'll realize that behind the raising of Lazarus is actually the death of Jesus.

That is, it's by Jesus' death that he can raise us to life. Just hold on to that thought and we'll come back to it. But for now, Jesus replies in verse 4, Now, Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. And notice a couple of things here. First, Jesus says this sickness will not end in death.

Yes, Lazarus will die, but Jesus knows he will raise him back to life. For with Jesus, death is not the end. Indeed, he brings life in the face of death.

[4 : 29] But also notice how odd verse 5 and verse 6 are side by side. Verse 5, Jesus loved them. So, verse 6, he delayed two more days.

What? It doesn't quite make sense. It's not normally how you show love for someone, is it? If my wife was sick in bed and asked me to take her to the doctor straight away, so I delayed two more days, it wouldn't go down very well, would it?

So why does Jesus delay and how is it loving? Well, verse 4 gives us the clue. Jesus delays until Lazarus dies for God's glory, do you see?

And to reveal God's character through Jesus. And in particular, here, his power even over death. So that, verse 4, when people see God's glory in Jesus, they might then glorify the Son, Jesus himself.

It's a bit like watching Roger Federer play in the Australian Open. I don't know if you're into tennis or not, but watching Roger is always worth doing. And when he plays, he reveals his glory, his power over tennis, if you like.

[5 : 38] And that leads to the crowds glorifying him with applause. Well, in a similar way, Jesus delays so he can raise Lazarus, not from sickness, but from death, to reveal God's glory, his power over death.

And that would lead the crowds to glorify Jesus. And not with applause, but with belief in him. And yet, how is that loving for Lazarus and Mary and Martha?

Well, in the words of John's purpose statement, remember, it's by believing in Jesus that we have life in his name. Life without end. And so this will help them believe so that they can have that life.

Which do you think is more loving? Helping their brother stay alive for a few more years? Or helping them to believe so they can all have an eternity of life?

Which do you think is more loving? Well, after delaying two more days, Jesus now heads to the state of Judea, where Lazarus' hometown of Bethany is. But the disciples in verse 8 remind him that the last time he was there, the Jews tried to kill him.

[6 : 51] And like in verse 2, this is another reference to Jesus' death. But we see here that Jesus is not worried. He knows it's not time for him to die. That's what verses 9 to 10 are talking about.

There are 12 hours in the day. In other words, there's still time for me to do God's work. It's not time for me to die just yet. And so let's go and let me do that work like raising Lazarus.

So verse 11, after he said this, he went on to tell them, Our friend Lazarus hath fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him. His disciples replied, Lord, if he sleeps, it will get better.

But Jesus had been speaking of his death. His disciples, though, thought he meant natural sleep. Here we again see that with Jesus, death is not the end. In fact, he likens it to sleep.

When we sleep, we don't stop living, do we? We don't stop breathing. We continue to live through sleep. Well, with Jesus, that's what our physical death is like.

[7 : 49] We'll continue to live spiritually even through death. But the disciples don't quite get it because we read in verse 14 that Jesus had to tell them plainly, Lazarus is dead.

And for your sake, I am glad I was not there so that you may believe. But let us go to him. Then Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, let us also go that we may die with him.

Thomas really has no idea. But did you notice that this delay is not just to help Mary and Martha and Lazarus believe? Verse 15, it's also to help the disciples believe.

But don't they already? Well, yes, but to help them believe even more. Given the context, it seems they don't quite grasp that with Jesus, death is like sleep.

And that with Jesus, we can have life even in the face of death. Such that it changes how we view this life in the face of our death.

[8 : 50] And I wonder whether we can sometimes be a bit like the disciples here who don't quite get it or need to believe even more. For example, I know of some retired Christians who have said that they want to have as many experiences in this world as they can before they die.

And so they're often away traveling and they don't like visiting the same place twice. And don't you see me, there's nothing wrong with traveling. It's right to enjoy God's creation.

We all need breaks and so on. But they're actually away from their church more than they're at their church to serve and encourage. Because they want to have as many experiences as possible before they die.

Now, they absolutely believe in Jesus. They are true Christians. And yet they don't seem to have truly grasped that with Jesus, they have life without end. That they'll have an eternity of experiences to enjoy ahead of them.

And so if they truly grasped that, then they'd let go of the branch called earthly experiences and serve God more, you see. They'd live life differently now in the face of their death.

[10 : 04] Well, Jesus arrives at Bethany where we see the heartache of death and yet hope. So point to verse 17. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in a tomb for four days.

Now, Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him.

But Mary stayed at home. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. You can almost hear her heartache, can't you?

It seems the family is quite well known, though, because before Jesus even reaches the home, someone's told him that Lazarus has been dead for four days.

And many Jews from Jerusalem come to comfort them. But there's great grief in Martha's voice. And yet she's helped by her belief.

[11 : 00] Verse 22. But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask. It's a great statement. And yet, despite this, Martha still doesn't seem to believe that Jesus can raise her brother from the dead now.

Because in verse 23, Jesus says that he will rise. He will rise again. But verse 24, Martha thinks Jesus is talking about the last day. What we heard about from our first reading, where everyone will rise at judgment day, some to everlasting life, some to everlasting shame.

And so to help her, Jesus tells her that he has the power of life. Verse 25. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

The one who believes in me will live even though they die. And whoever lives by believing me will never die. Do you believe this, Martha? Here Jesus says he is the resurrection and the life.

And then he unpacks it in those two verses. So first, he is the resurrection, which means verse 25. The one who believes in him, Jesus will raise to life physically after they have died.

[12:16] He will give us a new body with no more imperfections or pain. No more doctors appointments or health issues. No more kids telling you how old you're looking.

I got them back. I gave them extra jobs to do in the house. Jesus is the resurrection, you see. But he's also the life. The one who gives us eternal life spiritually now.

So verse 26, he says, whoever believes in him will live spiritually and never die. And so when our bodies pack it in, we'll go straight to be with God still alive.

I've tried to show it actually in a diagram, which has a little mistake in it. But anyway, the top line is spiritual life. It begins the moment we believe in Jesus.

And it continues through our physical death, through judgment day forever. He is the life. We'll never die spiritually. But our physical life, this is where the mistake is, the green dot should start on judgment day.

[13:22] When Jesus returns on judgment day, he will raise our bodies physically to be perfect bodies. Jesus is the resurrection. This is what we'll have.

But only if we believe in him. I mean, did you notice how many times Jesus uses the word believe in these two verses? Three times in just two verses. And it seems Martha does believe, verse 27.

She says, yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the son of God, who is to come into the world. What a statement of faith. It's almost John's purpose statement, if you remember, you know, to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God.

Well, here it is from Martha's mouth. And yet she hasn't quite fully realized the last bit about having life in his name.

Because when he says, do you believe I'm the resurrection of life? She says, yes, I believe you're the Messiah. It's not quite exactly what Jesus asked. And more than that, if you skip over to verse 39 on the right-hand side of your page, Jesus asked for the stone to be taken away in verse 38.

[14:34] Oh, sorry, verse 39. But Lord, said Martha, you know, it's been four days. By this time, there's a bad odor. You know, the body is starting to decay.

Or if you've got the King James Version, Lord, he stinketh. She doesn't quite believe that Jesus is the one who can raise her brother from the dead now. And in fact, we know this because verse 40, Jesus replies by saying, Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?

You'll see me at work. My power over death. You see, while Martha certainly believes in Jesus, she hasn't quite grasped that he is the one who brings life in the face of death.

Which for her means he can raise her brother now. And for us, it means we can have the certain hope of life in the face of death. Whether it's our own death or the death of a loved one.

And we need this hope, don't we? Because death causes such hard ache, doesn't it? I mean, just look at how Mary responds. Jesus sends Martha back to get Mary.

- [15 : 47] Mary arrives, followed by the crowd. Come with me to verse 32. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. Where have you laid him? He asked.

Come and see, Lord, they replied. And Jesus wept. Mary says almost the same thing as Martha. Only here we're also told that there was weeping of the Jews as well as weeping of Mary.

Because death ends life in every sense, doesn't it? Whatever purpose we had, death takes it. Whatever gifts we used, death takes them.

Whatever relationships we enjoyed, death takes them. Like how Mary and Martha both emphasised their relationship with Lazarus.

- [16 : 49] Do you notice how they both say, my brother would not have died. But death took their relationship. Or like two weeks ago, on the next slide here, everyone's heard of Kobe Bryant now, I think.

That basketball legend who died in a helicopter crash, along with his daughter, who's pictured there, and seven others. People spoke about how much Kobe still had to offer, in experience and mentorship and knowledge.

But death took it all. Or like the four young kids, who only last Sunday, were hit by a drunk driver on their way to the shops in Sydney.

Anthony, Angelina, Sienna, and their cousin, Veronica. They were aged just 13 years to 9 years in that age range. They had so much life to live, so much more to give.

But death took it. And so it's right that we weep at death. Even Jesus weeps when he sees the tomb.

- [17 : 53] For God designed us to live. Death is actually not natural. Rather, it's a result of sin in our world. And what's worth, death leads to judgment as a result of sin in our lives.

This is the human condition. And so understandably, then, Jesus weeps over it. But Jesus also came to deal with it. To bring life in the face of death.

Oops. And he would do this by his own death. That's why John, I think, has included all these allusions to Jesus' death. Like verse 2, being anointed with the perfume for his burial.

Verse 8, remember they're trying to kill you, Jesus. Or even more clearly, verse 50 to 53, where Caiaphas, the high priest, prophesies that Jesus will die for the nations and all the scattered children of God, like us here in Melbourne.

For it's by his death that he pays for our sin. And having dealt with sin, he can now give us life if we believe in him.

- [19 : 05] And to help us believe, he then proves he can give life in the face of death. So come with me to verse 41. Verse 41. So they took the stone away. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said this, Jesus called out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and cloth around his face. And Jesus said to them, take off the grave clothes and let him go.

It's extraordinary. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. And at the end of verse 43, where it says, take off the grave clothes, it's literally release him and free him. For Jesus has released him and freed him from death.

Of course, Lazarus will physically die again one day, but this miraculous sign proves that Jesus can bring life in the face of death. That we might believe in him.

[20:13] And verse 45, many do though. Verse 46, some don't. We don't have time to look at the rest of the passage. So let me try and pull some things together. This chapter is written that we might firstly see who Jesus is.

He is the resurrection and the life. The one who gives life in the face of death. Spiritual life now, which lasts even through death, just like we live through sleep.

And physical life after we die, we will be given perfect bodies free from disease, decay and death. But secondly, this chapter is written so that, not just so we see who Jesus is, but then believe in him.

And so can I ask you, do you, do you believe in Jesus? And for us who do, then this chapter is written that we like the disciples and like Martha and Mary might believe even more.

Such that we are content to let go of the branch. when God says it's time to. Now, of course, it's right to try and live. After all, God designed us to live.

[21:25] It's okay to, you know, not look forward to the process of dying and the pain, because pain is never pleasant. But we need not fear death itself. Because we know we'll continue to have life, even through death.

Like we continue to live through sleep. In Christ alone, our hope is found. Remember, there's no fear in death, the song says. I remember two men from our church, about the same age, heard the same disease, both facing their own potential death.

And I was visiting them once in the same week. And I remember one day, one of them saying to me, look, I'm not ready to go. There's still so much I wanted to experience in this life.

And he, his wife, we're struggling with this. And then another day, the same week, another one, the other one said to me, I'm ready to go when the Lord calls me. And I'm helping my wife be ready to.

Both believe in Jesus. Both are Christians. But one had really grasped hold of the fact that Jesus is the resurrection, the life. He believed even more.

[22:36] Such that he was content to let go of the branch. Whenever the Lord called him. But it's not just to help us believe when it comes to our own death. It's even to help us believe when it comes to the death of our loved ones, which is the harder one.

You see, it's absolutely right. We grieve their death and even the thought of them dying. It's absolutely right that we miss them. After all, we're built for relationships.

I was at a 50th anniversary last night celebrating it. Not my 50th anniversary. Someone else's. Happy anniversary, Neil and Mavis. Relationship. We're built for relationships.

Terrific. And so it's right. We grieve and miss. And yet we can still find peace. And contentment such that we can let them go and not grieve.

Like people who have no hope. Because we do have hope. We have the certain hope that they are alive with Christ now. And whatever time we lose with our loved ones, we will more than be made up for in the life to come.

[23:42] For we will see them again and spend an eternity with them. I mentioned that to my wife the other day. And she wasn't so sure she liked the idea of that. But we'll all be perfect.

The mother who lost her three children last weekend goes to a Catholic church. And she seems to have a genuine faith. She was interviewed by Channel 7 the day after she lost her three children. Typical media.

But she said, and I think this is the right slide. Is that the one where she forgives? Yeah. It's extraordinary, isn't it? She actually goes on to say that, I do not hate him because that's not who we are.

But even more extraordinary is what she said on the next slide. I've got it from the article. To be honest with you, I am sad. I am heartbroken. But I am at peace.

Why? Because I know my kids are in a better place. Isn't that extraordinary? Here is someone who truly believes in Jesus.

[24 : 43] Despite not seeing her kids grow up. Despite not even seeing them perhaps go to university, get a job, perhaps get married, have grandkids for them. Despite missing out on all of that, she says she is still at peace.

Because she knows they are in a better place. And no doubt, we'll see them again. And so yes, she rightly grieves and misses and will continue to grieve and miss them, perhaps for the rest of her life.

But she has let go and is at peace. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. The one who comes to bring life in the face of death.

Give us certain hope. Such that we can let go of the branch. Whether that branch be trying to get as many experiences of this life as possible before we die. Or letting go of the fear of our death.

Or letting go of the resentment of missing out on life with our loved ones. And so the question is, will we really believe in him and let go when he says? Or will we call out, is anyone else up there?

[25 : 50] Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for this great chapter, which reminds us of our certain hope in Christ alone. Father, we thank you that he is the resurrection and the life, which means life will never end for us who believe.

What's more, he will raise our bodies to new life on the last day. Help us, we pray, to live our life in the face of death by truly believing in him.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.