

EASTER DAY - Resurrection - A Sneak Preview

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[0 : 00] Our Father and Lord, we thank you for this remembrance today of the rising of your Son. As we explore these scriptures together, please help us understand them, and understanding them, help us to live properly in the light of them.

We pray this, Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Please sit down. It was my first year or so of being an ordained clergyman, and I picked up the phone, and a tear-laden voice came into my quiet Sunday afternoon, and the news shattered me.

You see, Peter was a person just like you and me, a man with his own personality, yet I guess he wasn't that different from most 18-year-olds like him. He was 18. He had life ahead of him.

And then suddenly that young life was cut short. Suddenly he was dead. He died choking on his own vomit in an outside toilet of the family home sometime between midnight and morning.

That horror which was death had struck again. With all its fury, its revolting severity, its pain, but this time it had struck my friend.

[1 : 18] Death had come to me yet again with all its grim reality. In our calmer moments, I think we think that death is merely the common destiny of human beings. Sure, it's painful and terrifying, but death is the lot of human beings.

It's natural, and all of us by nature are subject to it. Just as we all live, so shall we all die. And yet, when death strikes us, then surely the truth must hit us also.

You see, death is not natural. It's an abomination. It is a horrible absurdity. You see, death breaks relationships. It has no halo.

It tears us apart. It leaves a gaping vacuum. Surely death was not the way things were meant to be. If you've had someone close die to you, you know that to be the case.

You say, surely this is not how things are meant to be. Surely such termination is not the way God planned life and relationships. And let me tell you that the Bible agrees. Death is not natural.

[2 : 20] It is a foreign element in the way the world was created by him. It is not the way God set up the world. Death is in the world, theologically, because humans kick against God.

Because humans have broken relationship with God. You see, death is a symbol in our world that every human being wants to live without God. They want to live in independence from him.

They want to live away from him. They want to be dead as far as he is concerned. Death is present in our world because all people without distinction have sinned.

And in sinning, they have become subject to death. Death has spread to all people because all have joined in. All have sinned. So death, in one sense, theologically, is not a natural phenomenon.

Death is only here with all its horror because we are rebels. We are out of relationship with God.

And because it's not natural, because they knew it was not the way God intended things to be, the writers of the Bible began to search.

[3 : 22] They began to look for how God would deal with this anomaly. With death. They began to grapple with how a God who loved life would conquer death.

And the death that human beings had brought upon themselves through sin. So as they thought, their thinking went through the following transitions. This is a summary, in one sense, of what I think the Bible says about this topic.

They knew from the very first page of scripture, you see, that God is a speaking God. God sets up creation by speaking. He's a speaking and therefore living God.

He's the creator of life, the source of life, the upholder of life. And the Old Testament captured this in one of its favorite expressions. It was this phrase. As the Lord lives.

And we have a great example in the book of Ruth. And I'm going to put these texts up as we move through them. And the hero of the book, Boaz, swears to the heroine of the book, Ruth. And he

makes promises to her with these words.

[4 : 22] As the Lord lives, I will do it. That's the first step. God is a living God. Second step also comes from the Old Testament. For as the Old Testament knows God as a God who is living.

They know him also as a God who is faithful. That is, he can be depended upon. He can be trusted. He's true. He's loyal. For example, look at Exodus chapter 34 verse 6.

In Exodus 34 verse 6, God defines himself and his name with these words. He declares to Moses that he is the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.

Let's move to the third characteristic of God. This is that God is a sovereign God. By this we mean he controls all that happens in his world. You see, God didn't just create the world.

He upholds it, watches over it, guides it, controls it. Let me give you one example in the Bible.

Psalms 24 verses 1 and 2. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.

[5 : 28] For he founded upon the seas and established it upon the waters. That is, he created the world. It is his to run. He owns it. Now for the fourth characteristic. This one comes from Psalm 95.

We sing it in our earlier, sorry, we say it in our earlier service once a month at morning prayer. It goes like this. For the Lord is a great God and a great king above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth and the mountain peaks belong to him. Or Psalm 139.

Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you're there.

If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me. Your right hand will hold me fast.

You see, there's no place over which God is not sovereign. Fourth point rises from this one. You see, because God's sovereign over all, he must also be sovereign over life and death.

[6 : 29] As it says in 1 Samuel 2.6, the Lord brings death and makes alive. He brings down to the grave, he raises up. Or in Deuteronomy 32.39.

See, now that I myself am he, says God, there is no God beside me. I put to death, I bring to life. I have wounded, I will heal. No one can deliver out of my hand.

You see, there's no place you can go, not even death itself. God is sovereign over life and death.

Next, God cannot, well, everything we've said so far gives hope in the Old Testament, you see.

In the Old Testament, life means relationships. Above all, it means relationship with God. God has entered into relationship with his people. He's made a covenant. He's made relationship.

They belong to him. He belongs to them. He has promised that that relationship will be everlasting.

Therefore, death cannot terminate it. So listen to the psalmist in Psalm 73, verse 26.

[7 : 32] He says, with boldness and confidence. My flesh and my heart may fail, that is, I may die. But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Can you hear that hope? It must last.

Brings us to the seventh point. In that very same psalm, Psalm 73, we see it. Just a few verses earlier, he says, yet I am always with you.

You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterward, you will take me into glory. Or listen to Psalm 49, verse 15.

But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead. He will surely take me to himself. You see what they're saying? You're saying, if God is who he says he is, if I'm in a relationship with him, well, death can't even break that. The end point of this is that God must do away with death.

It is the inevitable consequence of everything that they knew about God. So we hear in Isaiah 25, verse 8. He will swallow up death forever. The sovereign Lord will wipe away tears from all faces.

[8 : 34] He will remove his people's disgrace from the earth. The Lord has spoken. You see, the living God who speaks, he said, that's it. I'm going to do away with it. However, there's one more point that emerges from the end of the Old Testament.

And it's this. That death is the beginning of judgment. That is, with death will come God's judgment. After death, God will deal with the dead according to how they have dealt with him.

Our first Bible reading from today, Daniel 12, made that clear. I wonder if you remember it. Daniel 12, 2, we read this. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake. Some to everlasting life.

And others to shame and everlasting contempt. That is the very last verse that is voice on this topic in the Old Testament. It is a promise that God is God.

And if so, then death cannot be the end. He cannot permit life to end with the grave. God will raise, therefore, the dead. The ones who live in reliance upon him will rise to everlasting life.

[9 : 39] The ones who denied him and lived in independence from him or resistance against him will rise to everlasting shame. And that is where the Old Testament ends on this topic.

As you can see, there were still no guarantees. But with Jesus, this all changes. With Jesus, the thinking of the Old Testament blossoms into this glorious promise and climax.

For the first time, resurrection becomes more than a hope. It becomes a certainty. And there's one incident in the life of Jesus which captures this.

This story is one found in our second Bible reading for today. And if you'd have it open, that would be helpful for us all. So 1076 from memory, page 176.

John 11. Now the story is about a man who was ill. This man was a friend of Jesus, a very close friend. And everyone amongst his associates knew it.

[10 : 37] And the sisters of this man knew it. And they made sure Jesus remembered this. They say to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick. You can hear what's being implied in that, can't you?

No doubt they were expecting that as they reminded him of the friendship, it would coerce him to act and he'd do something. He would just come to Lazarus and heal him.

Or perhaps he might even do it from a distance as he's done elsewhere. He would just say the word. But no matter what, they knew that he would care and respond and Lazarus would be healed.

But they're surprised. And we too are surprised when we read the text. Our expectations are not met. Their expectations are not met. Jesus doesn't come. He doesn't say the word. He doesn't heal. His love issues in a very much, in a very strange response. He stays silent. And he stays where he is while his friend dies. He doesn't even do that word from a distance thing, does he?

[11 : 38] We're told this in verses 5 and 6. He stayed where he was for two more days. And all he can say is that somehow that sickness of his friend Lazarus is going to glorify God.

See verse 4? This sickness will not end in death. No, it's for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it. Then comes a rather strange section, verses 7 through to 16. And the background to them is, at this point in the ministry of Jesus, Jesus has been saying things which have really upset the Jews.

His message, his actions have been threatening them. And they are under pressure. They're so under pressure that it's no longer possible for Jesus to be publicly in Jerusalem or the surrounding countryside.

To go to Jerusalem or nearby Bethany is to ask for trouble from the Jews. It's to court death. And the disciples know this, so they understand. And you can see they understand and know it in these verses.

Because they know it and understand it, they know it would not be expedient for him to go there at the moment. They perceive that Lazarus will just have to take his back seat for a moment.

Although, as I said, I'm not sure why Jesus can't do the word from a distance thing that he's done elsewhere.

[12 : 48] But that's why they're so surprised in these verses. Look at verse 7. Two days pass. And Jesus says to his disciples, let's go back to Judea. I think, now what would you be saying at this point?

Well, why couldn't you do this two days earlier if you're not afraid of going to Judea? But look at verse 8. But Rabbi, they said, a short while ago the Jews were trying to stone you, yet you're going back. And Jesus responds, are they not 12 hours in the daylight?

Anyone who walks in daytime won't stumble, for they see by this world's light. It's when the person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light. And after he said this, he goes on to tell them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.

But I'm going to wake him up. His disciples respond in verse 12. Lord, if he sleeps, he's going to get better. John gives an explanation, verse 13. Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he tells them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And for your sake, I'm glad that I was not there so that you may believe. Let's go to him.

[13 : 52] And Thomas, called Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, let's go so that we may die with him also. You can see the point, can't you? Lazarus has died.

Jesus will die if he goes to Jerusalem. Jesus was willing to let Lazarus die. It would help the disciples to learn something. It would help them to believe.

So Jesus goes. By the time he arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead and buried for four days. Probably beginning to smell in the tomb, as it were.

Well and truly dead. The women are distraught. Mary is the first to confront him in verses 21 and 22. Lord, she says, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But I know that even God will give you whatever you ask. The conversation, this conversation that follows is, I think, the center of this story. Jesus responds, verse 23. Your brother will rise again.

[14 : 53] Martha, verse 24. Oh, I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day. Then Jesus again, in verse 25. I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.

And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? Martha responds, verse 27. Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.

Martha then goes to fetch Mary. And Mary comes weeping. Listen to her grief. She, you see, friends, I imagine she's experienced what everyone experiences when someone close to them dies. You know, those days of indescribable sorrow. That disillusionment. Those sleepless nights. Those endless reminders. She's been perhaps accosted by those endless reminders and paralyzing anxiety.

She's felt that unendurable sense of loss as it creeps up on you like a shadow. She's been numbed by feelings of anger, helplessness, denial, confusion.

[15 : 58] And I imagine with all of that background, she comes to the Lord of life. The one who could save. The rescuer. But look at what she says.

She blurts out all that she must have been feeling. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And Jesus is moved.

We're told he's troubled. He stands, you see, facing death in all its severity. He stares sin and its consequences in the face.

He sees and understands the human predicament. The ravages of sin, the dislocation it causes, the misery and the agony. And he can see it in the tears of his friend.

You see, it tears relationships. Death in all its horror has come to him and to those whom he loves. And he is troubled, angry and grieved.

[17 : 01] And John relates it simply in the shortest verse in the Bible. Verse 35. Jesus wept. The significance of those words is incredible. They go beyond anything that words can express, really.

Friends, these verses, in my view, capture the love of God. Here is the mystery of God becoming man. Of God coming to earth in Christ. Of him suffering and dying for us so that we might live. You see, these tears in the Son of God well up from a depth that is infinitely more profound than human grief and sympathy.

These are the tears, friends, of a sinless man. These are the tears of a sinless man who was made sin for us. These are the tears of the Son of God.

Of the troubled spirit of Jesus, the man. A man who in our place. Took, would on Good Friday experience the desolation of being separated from God.

[18 : 06] From whom he had not been separated in all eternity. They are the precursor of that terrible cry on the cross. Where God would, as it were, metaphorically be torn apart.

And where Jesus would wail. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why? This is what it cost him so that we might have him present.

Because Jesus wept with Martha and Mary. Because he agonized in the garden. Because he suffered and died on the cross. Because he took the agony of bearing all the anger of God at our sin. Because of those tears.

God says that he'll be raised to the place where there will be no tears. The Apostle Paul captures it. Listen to Romans 5, 6-10.

He says, You see, just at the right time. While we were still powerless. Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely would anyone die for a righteous person.

[19 : 11] Though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us. In that while we were sinners. Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood.

How much more will we be saved from God's wrath through him? For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son.

How much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life? But let's return to John. In this passage in John.

John goes on to tell us how God spoke the word. Just like God the Father. His word was creative. Just as in Genesis 1.

It did new things. Chaos was replaced by order in the tomb. Death was replaced by life. Grief was replaced by joy. The dead man lived.

[20 : 13] In my mind's eye. Whenever I read this passage, I see him coming out with those cloths wrapped around him. Walking and thinking. You think what is. And his resurrection. Became a sign.

A sign. That when Jesus goes to Jerusalem. As he inevitably will. Death will not keep him. It will not defeat him.

Like this dead man Lazarus. Jesus. Lazarus. Jesus will rise from the dead. And his resurrection will become a guarantee.

A promise that through his life. Through his death. Through his resurrection. He will be the life giver. And all who believe in him will be given life now.

And all who believe in him will be raised from the dead on that last day. Death will not have the last say. For God is the living God. He's the God that the Old Testament proclaimed. Death will not have the last say.

[21 : 07] It will not defeat life. Life will rise up to overpower death. And in Jesus. Life will have the last word. And today we celebrate.

Its actuality. As we wonder at the rising. To life of Jesus. But let's remember.

Friends let's remember. What we said about. What was said about. His resurrection. And its impact by him himself. He said. I am the resurrection. And the life.

Those who believe in me will live. Even though they die. And who lives and believes in me. Will never die. And friends. In the text.

Jesus says this. To those listening. Do you believe this? Well friends. Do you believe it? Let's pray.

[22 : 12] Our Father. We thank you for your son this day. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. That death will not defeat life. For you are the living God.

Thank you. For the Lord Jesus Christ. Who is the resurrection. And the life. Thank you. For his promise. That who believes in him. Will live. Even though they die. And that whoever lives.

And believes. In him. Will never die. And Father. Today we confess. That we believe this. And we thank you for him. And we pray in his name.

Amen.