

2017 The resurrection and the life James Shepherd

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[0 : 00] When reading a passage like John chapter 11, we are confronted with both the reality of death, its pain, but also the hope of being raised from the dead again. It can be a very difficult narrative to process for us.

For most of us, we're used to the narrative of the world. We engage with the world each and every single day, and we hear that there is no hope in the face of death when looking at the world and how the world views death.

Because the world finds this kind of narrative in John 11 quite foreign, quite different. Death is something that can't be stopped. It can't be explained. It brings the wonderful gift of life to an end. And this is a narrative that our world is so used to seeing and hearing each and every day. But for them, for our world, it's too much to grasp. It's too much to handle. For a narrative without hope, a narrative that just ends, is not one we want to pay any attention to at all.

Instead of acknowledging death as something we should talk about, we redirect our focus. We focus on something else. We focus on any other narrative that gives life or exemplifies life.

[1 : 06] And every product we buy, every service we use, every policy that we might have, plays on its underlying theme of life in its narrative. Everything from beauty products that use every single life-giving adjective in the book to sell its product, to superannuation policies that guarantee you a secure retirement so you can go and live your life the way they want.

They, all at the heart of it, are trying to sell you life, trying to get you to focus in on life. And we're in a world where now eating healthy, going to the gym, in our active wear is considered cool because of the benefits to your health and to the quality of your life.

We're always hearing about the new power foods such as the cyborgs and the almighty kale, foods that are supposed to give us all we need to live a vibrant and healthy life now in the present.

The narrative we are constantly engaged with each and every day, a version of life and life abundantly with no end at all in sight. We never hear about death in our world.

No one ever talks about death in the services, the products or the policies that we take. No one wants to talk about the reality of death in our life. Our world would rather live in a fantasy world where death is not even a thing.

[2 : 29] But whilst we might be able to put off death for some time, death has a way of catching up to us and confronting us when we least expect it. You could be healthy for a very long time in your life.

And then one morning you wake up with sharp pains in your chest. Your blood pressure is through the roof. And you need to call an ambulance to come pick you up, unaware of what's going to happen next. You could wake up one morning with a headache to find out a week later you've developed a brain tumour.

You could be driving up the coast on your way to the holiday you've been looking forward to for a very long time. And one moment you're driving, everything is fine. And the next moment you're waking up in hospital, you can't fit your legs, the doctor tells you you have damaged your spine, and you won't be able to walk again.

The signs of death painfully pull us back into reality, out of our fantasy world, and places us in this reality where we have to deal with death in front of us.

Recapturing our focus. Uninvitingly putting death on the table again is something we have to deal with. Something we have to talk about. And so what then?

[3 : 40] What do you do when you are confronted with death? Our world is so ill-equipped to deal with the real narrative of life, that we live and that we die.

That death is real and something that we must face. But in John chapter 11, the narrative is a bit different. Here we see Jesus and his disciples confronted with death.

News has come to them that their friend Lazarus has fallen ill. And before they even arrive in Bethany, Jesus pronounces to them in verse 16 that they are dead, that he is dead.

However, he ends his sentence by saying to them, let us go to him. Which begs the question, what is going to happen when Jesus arrives on the scene?

When he is confronted with death, what will he do? If Jesus is the one who has come to bring life and life to the full, as we see back in chapter 10, what can we expect will happen when the one who has come to bring life is confronted with death?

[4 : 42] The story of Lazarus is written for a world that is confounded by death. When we struggle to know how to respond to death, we must look to Jesus who shows us how.

So looking at Jesus' example here in John chapter 11, there are a few things we can see. Firstly, we see that we must acknowledge that death is a destructive and painful and unnatural force in our world.

Death not only takes away our opportunity to enjoy life in this world, but it also takes away life in community. Death will always come in between and end all of our relationships, even our deepest and most closest ones.

In excess was wrong. Nothing will tear us apart. Wrong. No. Death will tear us apart, and death has been tearing us apart for a very long time now.

Again, a song like that appeals to us, doesn't it? A world in which we will always live together forever. Jesus' own response says it all.

[5 : 52] Verse 35, the shortest verse in all the Bible captures the grief that Jesus was in when he was face-to-face confronted with death. It says, At a distance, back up north, Jesus was able to keep his emotions in check, simply to say that Lazarus is dead.

But when he is face-to-face with the grief and the pain, the sadness of death, he can't help but feel the sharp pain that it brings.

One of the reasons why it's so often easy for us to ignore death in our life is because we rarely are confronted with it. And I'll admit, as someone who is pretty young, I've rarely confronted death in my own life.

We see it only far away in the news, in statistics, articles, in TV shows and movies, in places where it doesn't seem quite real to us, where we don't feel the gravity of what's going on.

But rarely do we see it face-to-face. And so when we do see it face-to-face, the grief, the pain of death can be overwhelming. We have been so used to the narrative of life and life abundantly that our world projects on us that when the reality of death strikes us, it confounds us.

[7 : 10] How do we respond? What do we do? But Jesus' response here is quite interesting. In verse 33, When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved and troubled.

The phrase deeply moved there, I think, is a bit of a soft translation. The word used here is often used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the angry snorting of war horses.

So if you can imagine a war horse as they anticipate battle, the anger they feel, as they feel the battle coming, this is Jesus' response. It's not simply that he is moved, but he is angry.

Angry as he stares down at his enemy, death. And for what it's doing to the people around him that he loves. Now the word troubled here intensifies this emotion as well.

The same word for trouble is used back in John chapter 5 with a beggar by the pool of Siloam. The beggar who wants to be healed in verse 7, he says this, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred or troubled.

[8 : 25] If you imagine a lake that's entirely still, you're on holiday, you're enjoying the pristine, crystal clear lake. And all of a sudden, annoying little rat bag kids come up and start skipping rocks across the lake.

And you are annoyed because you're trying to enjoy this lake and the beautiful, pristine nature of it. But now you are troubled, just as this lake is also just being troubled and disturbed.

That's how Jesus feels right now. This picture of what is going on for him right now, the death of Lazarus has made him deeply angry within, to the point that his anger is bubbling up inside of him. He is not at peace, he is stirred. The best translation I found was in the message, actually. And it says this, the anger welled up in him, like a wave coming up.

Why this intense anger? Because death is not a natural part of life, but an unnatural phenomenon that rules our present age.

[9 : 32] He is angry because death stands opposed to God's good order, and robs the glory of God found in creation, blinding humanity to the goodness and love of God.

We have been blinded if we think death is a natural part of life. But the thing is, many people do feel it's natural. Many people think that if eventually all things die, if we can observe that everything dies in this world, then it must be natural, it must be normal.

It is repeatable, and I can test it. It's the way our world functions. But even those who might believe death is natural struggle to accept the loss of relationship that we talked about in death.

And you see this all the time at funerals, when you hear people say, he hasn't really died, but he lives on in our hearts and our memories. She's with the angels now looking down on us.

His spirit will always be with me. If you remember when Philip Hughes passed away after being struck by a cricket ball, Michael Clarke gave a very emotional, moving eulogy.

[10 : 44] And you could see in his face that he really, really struggled to deal with death, death of one of his closest friends. And he said that Philip Hughes' spirit will always be with him when he went out to bat, trying to somehow make him live on beyond death.

People refuse to accept that the ones they love are gone forever. Even though our scientific world would say otherwise, our grief and our pain says something is very wrong and very unnatural about death.

And Jesus' own grief, he testifies to this. You might be sitting here waiting for me to get to the good bit, and we will get there, I promise. But it's so important, you don't miss the reality that we are all under.

If we caricature the reality and power of death, we will end up caricaturing the power and reality and the hope of the gospel. If we caricature the reality and power of death, we will end up caricaturing the power and the hope of the gospel.

As Christians, we do have an answer to suffering and death, for the one that's facing terminal illness, when tragedy strikes and goes south for us in our health. But the worst thing we can do for a brother and a sister, for a friend who is grieved by the passing of a loved one, is to not acknowledge the pain of death, the separation, the loss that is there, and therefore just jump straight to the good news.

[12 : 17] Remember, even though Jesus knew what he was about to do in waking up Lazarus, he wept. He felt the pain that death brings.

He mourned. And so a correct response to death, indeed, the first response is to grieve. Indeed, weep. It's to acknowledge the loss and the separation that happens, and to mourn that loss.

It's to be angry, and to acknowledge that this isn't right, this isn't good, this isn't natural, this isn't the way things are supposed to be. We can't beautify death.

It's not part of the circle of life, as the Lion King might tell us. Death is a real and destructive force in our broken and corrupt world.

But we are not those who grieve and who mourn without hope. And so secondly, this passage teaches us to respond to death by looking forwards to the hope of a future resurrection.

[13 : 27] When confronted with death, the Christian has a profoundly different narrative. When, whilst there is grief and anger, there is also hope. And the basis for this hope is in the one who is able to call us back to life again.

And so Jesus, stirring with anger, will not let death have the final word. With Lazarus, he asks in verse 34, Where have you laid him? When they take him to his body, he weeps.

Those around him are amazed at his love for him. But some are confused. In verse 37, But some of them said, Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?

The power of sin and death has so influenced and corrupted the minds of men that people question the power of God to bring life, to bring someone back to life.

This leaves Jesus in verse 38 to again be deeply moved, to be stirred with anger, to be warded with anger. Why? Because the power of death has threatened to rob his authority, his power, and his glory.

[14 : 38] The power of sin and death has dictated for far too long the hearts of men, causing them to fear, robbing the worship of man that belongs to God alone.

And so Jesus no longer allowed us to go on. He who calls himself the resurrection and the life, in verse 25, will do only what God can do. And that is raise the dead, promising that he would do, as he said in verse 5, give glory to God.

Verse 41, Then Jesus looked up 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 said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face.

Through the power of his word, Jesus gives life to a man who was dead. He doesn't invoke some foreign spirit or a power to raise him, nor does he mutter an incantation or a spell to bring him back. [15:52] He orders Lazarus to come out, and the dead man responds. He hears the call to new life and responds and comes out. It's through the command of his word that he overturns the power of death that had so taken Lazarus.

And such is the basis for our hope as well. When confronted with death, we will be grieved, we'll be angry. But facing death well, it's not trying to explain it away, it's a natural part of life, it's not trying to soften its impact by saying our loved ones live on in our hearts and minds.

Facing death well is acknowledging the grief and the pain that is there, but knowing full well that sin and death have been put unnoticed. Celebrating the day when Jesus will call us out of the grave to new life.

As he spoke of in John 5, he says this, Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who will hear will live.

And verse 28, he says, Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out. Those who have done what is good will rise to live and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

[17:15] As verse 42 reminds us, Jesus raised Lazarus in order that we might believe that he was sent by God, that he is the Christ.

It was for this purpose also that Jesus healed the man who was born blind back in chapter 9, which we looked at two weeks ago. That he would believe and respond in worship, that we too, as we read, might also believe and respond in worship in the one who can and will raise us from the dead. Although, we look forward to a much better resurrection than Lazarus. He was raised mortal, but will be raised immortal. He was raised still under the power and the reign of sin and death, but will be raised under the reign of Christ in the kingdom of God.

His resurrected body still subject to decay, but our resurrected bodies will be heavenly and perfect and never will decay. A funeral is different for a Christian.

No less painful, it's no less sad. The loss of a loved one is very real and it grieves us. But we are not without direction and hope. We don't need to try and explain death to make it fit somehow in our life and make it make sense.

[18:37] We can accept the painful reality of death. We can accept its unnatural destructive force because we know the one who has overcome the power of death and we look forward to and he will not only call out our loved ones from the grave, but us also to new life.

We anticipate the day in which sin and death will be no more. It will be rendered powerless. It's that hope we hold to when confronted with death in the present.

A glorious future for all who trust and believe in Jesus that he can raise them from the dead. It's a wonderful hope to hold on to in a world that is so afraid and so scared of dying.

But this, it's a hope that's already begun. It's a hope that's already begun to be realized in the present. Because this passage is not only what we anticipate in the future, but it's also paradigmatic of what we experience as a Christian in the present.

Which brings me to my last point I want to take out of this passage. The resurrection of Lazarus teaches us to hope in the resurrection of our bodies to come, but to also celebrate the new life we have received in the present by the Spirit.

[20:02] As we've mentioned before, we exist in a world that cannot accept the narrative of death. Their hope is in remaining in a state of ignorance, living out lives in a fantasy world where death doesn't exist, turning a blind eye to the decay of their own bodies.

But the irony of their pursuit is that they're already dead. The Bible not only talks about death physically, but also spiritually. Dead in sin and without any hope.

Ephesians 2.1 makes it very clear stating that we were all dead in our sins at one stage. So it doesn't make sense that dead people can't see, can't smell, can't hear.

They can't be persuaded of anything. They can't be persuaded to follow God. They're dead. That was once us.

although we had the image of life, we were spiritually dead. So how do those who are dead hear the life-giving word of the gospel?

[21 : 13] The resurrection of Lazarus not only points to what we can anticipate in the future, but testifies to the incredible life-giving work of the Spirit in the present.

it testifies to the magnificent creative work of the gospel. When we heard the gospel and believed for the first time, we were receiving the call of God to be made alive again.

Just as Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb to be made alive, we who were dead in our sins were called through the gospel to be made alive once more by His Spirit.

The resurrection of Lazarus shows us that the gospel is not merely a message by which we try and persuade people of. It's a creative word that gives life to those who are dead.

Lazarus had no power to raise himself up from the dead, let alone the mind to persuade it. It wasn't like Jesus went there and said, Lazarus, come on, mate, you want to come out? I know you do. I know you don't want to stay dead.

[22 : 19] Jesus didn't coerce Lazarus and say, come on, you have to come out. No, Jesus said, Lazarus, come out and by that powerful life-giving word, a man who was dead was given life.

It was a creative event. It was not a persuasive event. It was a word of creation, a creation event similar to what we see in Genesis chapter 1 where God says, let there be light and there was light. God speaks and the world comes into existence in the same way through the incredible power of the gospel God declares he speaks to us be alive in Christ by the power of spirit to which we respond in repentance and faith which is why Paul can say in 2 Corinthians 5 17 therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation.

New creation. The old is gone, the new has come. the only chance for life for immortal life is hearing the life-creating word of the gospel which gives life now and in the future with the resurrection of our bodies.

Our confidence then in a future bodily resurrection can be based upon our experience of a spiritual resurrection in the present. we do not need to fear death when we are those who have been made alive in Christ by his spirit.

[23 : 55] We will face death in this life. It will grieve us as we experience the unnatural loss of relationship and the joys of life but we can remain confident that Jesus will call us out of our graves because he has already called us out of our spiritual graves.

the story of Lazarus' resurrection gives us the means to face death well in a world that is confounded by death and how to respond.

This miracle reminds us that death is still a painful reality that we must face but one we don't face without hope. The only question we must ask of ourselves is the one Jesus asked of Martha.

Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? Can you face death well in this world knowing that your future is secured and you have new life in the present?

Because death and suffering will come when we least expect it and when the signs of death come or indeed death itself comes will you resign yourself to despair and hopelessness?

[25 : 11] Will you choose to ignore it and just jump into the fantasy world and pretend and ignore that death is not a thing? Or will you through your grief look forward to the redemption of your broken body?

That in the present you have new life by the Spirit and because of God's gracious and effective life-giving word you are able to walk with him and show all those around you the great joy you have in Christ in the face of death.

If you do not believe in Jesus if you are hearing the good news that he has come to bring life for the first time do not turn away do not retreat into the fantasy world hear and receive the call to life both spiritual life now and eternal life to come the Bible's narrative is not only far more satisfying than the world when it comes to how we should respond it's far more logical it recognizes that it's unnatural to which our grief also testifies to but it also provides the solution that Jesus has come as the resurrection and the life to overturn the power of sin and death that he might give us as he said in John 10 life and life of the fool let me leave you with Jesus words to Martha from verse 25 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 do you believe this