

Death is the enemy that has been defeated by Christ

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[0 : 00] I'd like to turn in your Bibles, please, to John chapter 11. John chapter 11.

I'm going to summarize, if I can, the whole of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12, but I'm only going to read the first few verses of John chapter 11.

Now hear God's word. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

But when Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

[1 : 30] Let me summarize for you just briefly, because I want to read just perhaps a few verses from 12. That, of course, Jesus arrives late.

He meets Martha. He meets Mary. At this point, of course, Lazarus has died. And, of course, Lazarus is in the grave. And then, of course, more happens, which we'll get into.

And then in chapter 12, I'll just read these few words in verse 3. I'll read from 1 to 3. Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus whom that Jesus had raised from the dead.

So they gave him dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the table. Mary, therefore, took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair.

The house was filled with the fragrance of perfume. Well, for those who've paid close attention, you're probably left puzzling with why John mentions that Mary was the one who anointed the feet of Jesus in John chapter 11.

[2 : 50] When it doesn't actually happen until John chapter 12. And that's what we'll look at. But we'll do so after we've sung once more. And please, if you can, turn again to John chapter 11.

John, as you do, I've often pointed out that when you read John, that you're not to read it in the same way.

In fact, you can't read it in the same way as Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John has a particular way of writing that the synoptics don't.

And a synoptic gospel is ones that repeat and reflect each other. Matthew, Mark, and Luke do that. John doesn't. John stands on its own.

But at the same time, it's still explaining the same wonderful gospel. But John has a particular way of doing it. And this is how God works through different men and women in the Bible that he does so according to their abilities as much as his work through them.

[4 : 03] And John has written this gospel. And he does things like this where he tells you one thing and then you find out that it doesn't happen until much later down the line.

But he has a very specific point of doing it. Matthew and Mark did the same kind of thing. There are necessary repetitions of why we see wonderful things in the gospel clearer than we would if they were just perhaps written chronologically as if just one thing happened after the other.

Well, John wants to point out very, very clearly, hence why he's bookended this part of his gospel with the anointing of Jesus' feet. He mentions in John chapter 11 verse 2 that Mary is the one who anointed the feet of Jesus with this oil.

But of course, it's not until John chapter 12 verse 3 that Mary actually anoints the feet of Jesus with the oil. And you've got to remember that John is writing this after that it's already happened.

And so he's telling us what happened. And he's decided that when he tells us what happened to put this little incident with Mary, which happened after the death and resurrection of Lazarus.

[5 : 21] He actually tells us about it before the death and resurrection of Lazarus. The question is, why does he do that? Why does John feel that it's important to tell that little event that happened afterwards before?

Why do we need to understand that as we read? Well, that's picked up in the words of Jesus where he recognizes that Lazarus is ill, but it's not an illness that leads to death.

And then, of course, you read the story and Lazarus dies. So what does Jesus mean? And John does this kind of thing all the time. He tells us one thing and then all of a sudden you read the kind of opposite.

But his point becomes unbelievably clear. Not unbelievably clear. It's believably clear. And why he does it.

Mary, of course, is getting Jesus ready for his death and resurrection. Mary is anointing Jesus ahead of time so that he goes to the cross smelling of perfume.

[6 : 28] The aroma that would have come from the body of Christ would have been of this expensive perfume. That that's the type of smell that Jesus would have had.

That with all and everything else that went on with him, that smell would not have left him. She was preparing him for his death and resurrection. And so John is preparing us as we begin to read this for what is about to happen.

Why it happens. And what it means. The death and resurrection of Lazarus is simply an illustration of what's going to happen to Jesus.

Jesus decided to use Lazarus to the glory of God and the illness of Lazarus to the glory of God. To show the people down here what would happen to him only a few days later.

Only a while later. And what we see in the death and resurrection of Lazarus is what we eventually see in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 36] The only difference, of course, is that Lazarus had to do his dying all over again. Where Jesus lives forevermore. As we begin then, I just want us to have a look at Jesus in all of this.

And Jesus' response and his reaction, why he does what he does and why it can help us in our understanding of both death and resurrection.

When Jesus hears that Lazarus is poorly, Mary and Martha send out this message. Jesus is not with them, of course. The disciples are with Jesus, but not with Mary and Martha.

And, of course, they come to him and they say that this man who you love is ill. In other words, it's another way of saying, because you love him, come quickly.

You know, because you love this person, come quickly. And the response of Jesus, of course, to that news is to say, verse 4, this illness does not lead to death.

[8 : 43] Rather, it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Now, from that point, Mary and Martha are going to have one question on their mind.

And that is, where is Jesus? Lazarus is poorly. And Lazarus will eventually die. And the question will always be, where is Jesus?

We asked him to come. We asked him to do something. And he doesn't. Or it doesn't appear that he does.

And what Jesus wants us to understand, and what Jesus wants them to understand, is that death is not the sorrow you think it is. In fact, from the point of view of Jesus, death is not really a sorrow at all.

And we begin to see this as we go through the story, looking at the death of Lazarus. And, of course, his resurrection. But you've got to remember that Jesus is using this to prepare us for his death and resurrection, which we look back on, but which the people in this day would have looked forward to.

[10 : 00] Not looked forward to in the fact that they were looking forward to it. But it was something yet to happen. The difference that Jesus wants us to understand, then, is the difference Jesus brings to death.

The difference that Jesus wants us to appreciate and to be assured of is how his death and resurrection changes what death does to a person. What sorrow actually is.

That death cannot be the sorrow that you think it is anymore. Death is an enemy, but it's not an enemy that wins. And this is the very truth that Jesus is beginning to convey to Mary and Martha,

and, of course, to everyone else.

And yet, of course, it's also true that Mary and Martha and us still feel the painful reality of it. But at the same time, it's not the sorrow you think it is.

It's a sorrow that we see with our eyes, that we feel with our flesh, with emotions and with our minds. But with the eyes of faith, we know, we really, really know, that it's not the sorrow you think it is.

[11 : 09] But so Lazarus dies. And Jesus didn't go so that he would die. And so the question that Mary and Martha have isn't put this way, but it's clearly evident when Jesus gets to them, is essentially, where were you?

Where were you? I think it's a perfectly natural question, isn't it? To cry out to Jesus in prayer on behalf of a loved one who's Pauling. And then for that loved one to go to be with God and to still wonder where Jesus was, why didn't you turn up and stop that from happening?

But, of course, as we saw this morning, why would God want to stop that from happening? Because precious is the death of one of his saints in his eyes. It's a precious thing that's happening.

They're simply going home. They're moving location. Will Jesus arise? And as he arise, verse 21 in John chapter 11, Martha approaches Jesus as she does, verse 21, and she says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

In other words, where were you? She understands the power that Jesus brings. She understands the difference that Jesus makes. But she also understands that Jesus has not made that difference.

[12 : 43] She understands that Jesus could have done something about it there and then if Jesus was there and then, but he wasn't. And so Jesus responds to her, verse 23, your brother will rise again.

And then she responds, verse 24, I know he'll rise again in the resurrection on the last day. And that's not the point that Jesus was making.

The point that Jesus is making is much more present tense than it is future tense. Remember, Jesus is about to do something that's going to change our understanding of what life and death really is.

And so these couple of statements that Martha says, Lord, if you had been here, and I know he'll rise again on the last day, is the very thing that causes Jesus to challenge her.

She has an understanding that Jesus can do something, but she doesn't believe that Jesus can do anything now that he's turned up. She believes that Jesus could have done something if he was there earlier, but she doesn't believe that Jesus can do anything now that he has arrived.

[13 : 59] She believes in the power of God, but she believes in the power of God as it was past tense or future tense. Yes, if Jesus was there, he could have done something, but now we're going to have to wait until the last day for anything to be made well.

And she's ruling out almost entirely in her understanding that Jesus is relevant today, that Jesus can actually do something today.

She has a past tense Jesus, she has a future tense Jesus, but it doesn't seem that she has a present tense Jesus. She wants to push Jesus off to both the beginning and the end, but not the immediate presence.

And so she gives no possibility whatsoever, no thought as it was to whatsoever, to the fact that Jesus can actually do something with someone who has died in the life of Lazarus.

And so notice what he says, verse 25, I am the resurrection and the life. I am, Jesus says, the resurrection and the life.

[15 : 09] Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And I wonder how many of us sat here this evening actually relate to Jesus in that present tense.

You know, when we think of conversion, we think of what happened to us in the past. When we think of glory, we think of what will happen to us in the future. And yet what Jesus is trying to drill down here is the reality of both in the present.

That don't miss the importance and the relevance of Jesus to you right here, right now, as if your life somehow is lacking the experience of a present tense Jesus.

That he can actually make a difference to Martha herself. She mourns the loss of her brother Lazarus. Jesus is pointing out to her a deep challenge, and that is that when a person dies who believes in him, they don't actually die.

They live. It looks like he's dead. But he's alive. That's a difficult thing to get your head around in many ways.

[16:24] But nonetheless, it's the truth. Christians don't die, they live, Jesus says. I am the resurrection, the life. He who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live.

It looks like they've died. Their body is still. It moves no more. Their eyes don't open. But they live. And so you have to take everything that you're seeing with your eyes and put it to one side and listen to what Jesus is saying.

Why? Because Jesus has said on many occasions, as does most of the New Testament, that the way a believer truly sees is by listening. You don't get to see the things of God without listening. You only get to see the things of God by listening. And that's why it's such a big challenge to get God's people to listen.

Or those who aren't God's people to listen to God's word. You know, their minds drift, they think of other things, they're mindful of other things, they're imagining, they're daydreaming.

[17:32] And yet God is telling us very, very clearly the way that you actually get to see the things that he's speaking about is by listening. Faith comes by hearing, by listening.

These are the things that we are meant to see. Lazarus is dead, but he's not dead. He who believes in me, though he dies, lives. We are meant to see with the eyes of faith, and sometimes we forget how to do this.

And yet the way to do it is very simple. Simply listen to what Jesus says about all matters of life. And so as we look at a brother who dies in the Lord, we recognize that he has died to us as it looks with our eyes.

But what's really happened is that he's just living somewhere else. He's moved house in a much better place. What about Mary?

Well, Mary's a different kettle of fish compared to Martha. And it's interesting that Jesus actually treats Mary a little bit differently than the way he treats Martha.

[18:46] And the way that he treats Mary is that Jesus is demonstrating to you in Martha that even in the midst of, let's say, a difficult situation, you still need to hear the truth.

You still need the challenge so that you cannot go into mourning thinking wrong things. That you cannot go into a state of sorrow not believing the right things.

And so some people need challenging. But with Mary, well, Mary's cries. And Jesus cries with her. I find it interesting in that Mary's statement, verse 32, is very similar to that of her sisters. And it says, if I can just read it to you now.

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. Same question almost.

[19:50] And yet notice what Jesus says, verse 33, or what we notice. 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. And Jesus wept. In other words, Jesus cries with you.

Mary's lost her brother. She's crying. And Jesus cries with her. But I've often said before and I'll say again this evening, I find the whole thing interesting for a number of different reasons.

And that is, why does Jesus cry with Mary? I mean, don't you find it interesting that Jesus knows that in about two minutes he's going to raise Lazarus from the dead?

Why cry? Why cry over Lazarus' death when you know in a couple of minutes you're going to raise him from the death? And that sorrow will turn to joy for both Martha and Mary.

[21:04] Why enter into the pain and the sorrow and weeping that Mary is experiencing? Martha's a bit of a fixer. Lord, if you had been here you could have done this.

You could have done that. You know, she doesn't seem to cry. She's just straight at Jesus. Mary, on the other hand, asks the same questions but asks it through tears. She's just broken down.

Jesus, with Martha, answers her questions, challenges her. But with Mary, he cries with her. As someone once said, you can't really love someone without at some point suffering because you love them.

You can't really love someone without at some point along the line of loving them suffer because you love them. I think it's true.

I think that's very true. But at the end of the day it still must be explained why Jesus cried. In fact, he doesn't just say that he cried, does it? It says in verse 33 that he was deeply moved in his spirit and he was greatly troubled.

[22 : 17] And the reason being is because Jesus hates death. Martha hates death. Mary hates death.

And so do you. Death was never part of God's creation. It was introduced death. Death is an enemy of all those who live. Death destroys.

Death is the last enemy that Christ dealt with. And he dealt with it finally. When Jesus enters into that sorrow with Mary, he does so because he understands what that enemy does to his people. He understands what that enemy does to a person. that it breaks them down to the point where they become like the Martha and the Mary where they cry out to God and have plenty of questions and even like Mary who has one question but then just cries along with the others who are there crying.

Jesus is deeply moved and troubled in his spirit because he looks at the enemy of death and what it does to people. And we should feel the same way about it. it's not natural that people die.

[23 : 31] It's become normal. It's become a normal occurrence because of sin but it was never part of the creation that God made. And this is something again that we tend to forget.

We get so used to seeing it that we tend to forget that death is an enemy but it is an enemy that has been defeated by Christ. Well let me conclude.

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead to the glory of God. Some are happy and others aren't. And Jesus knew that by raising Lazarus from the dead verses 45 through to 46 that this would lead to some plotting to kill him.

In fact it was the very death and resurrection of Lazarus that actually leads to the very death and resurrection resurrection of Jesus. Jesus knew the moment he did this for Lazarus and the people would see it that it would lead to his death but it raises a very simple question which no man can answer and it's this that if you've just seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead what do you think you can actually do to a man who can do that?

They plot to kill him but what do you actually think you can do to a man who can raise people from the dead? Nothing.

[25 : 00] And what can you do to those people as I said this morning who belong to the Lord who can raise people from the dead? And the answer is of course nothing.

Jesus gets us to see what life and death really mean. that when you live you live for him and when you die you simply continue to live somewhere else.

That when you live you live for him and when you die you simply live for him somewhere else. That Jesus said I am the resurrection and the life he who believes in me that though he dies yet shall he live.

We have the joy of being able to sit here this evening being able to stand here this evening and read these words knowing deep within our heart that they are convictionally true. That God by his spirit brings them home to us so that we understand them clearly but we also know them to be true. We're also able to be sat here not just knowing that the assurance we have is more than just a belief in our mind but it's actually resting in our heart with a sense of peace. That not only is this true of brothers and sisters who have gone to be with Jesus before it's going to be true of us when we eventually go to be with Jesus however we get there through death or through Jesus returning.

[26 : 27] However it doesn't matter the truth still remains. Here's the final thought. The reason we praise God for the death of Jesus is a strange one.

we praise God for the suffering of Jesus. We praise God that Jesus died in our place and yet if it wasn't for the reason it would be a very strange thing to do indeed wouldn't it?

But it's because we know what his death means it's because we know what his resurrection means that we're able to write songs about Jesus dying that we're able to write songs and sing songs about Jesus suffering that we're able to sing words about his resurrection and know the reason we're able to do that in a praiseworthy way is because we know what it means.

It means what Jesus said I am the resurrection and the life I am the resurrection and the life he who believes in me though he dies yet shall he live.

So I'll finish with this when you see a believer die they're not dead. When you see a believer die they have not died even though it looks like they do or have.

[27 : 53] They have simply moved location. They have simply moved from where they live with us to where they'll live forevermore because Jesus is the resurrection and the life.
Amen. And amen. Amen.