

The Resurrection and the Life

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Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0:00] Last Friday saw the defeat of the Assisted Suicide Bill in the Houses of Commons and of course it follows the defeat of the Assisted Suicide Bill in the Scottish Parliament earlier this year.

! But as a consequence of these bills being discussed in society, death has been debated a lot over recent years.

In his book, *Love is Stranger Than Death*, the philosopher Peter Kreeft ponders the meaning of death and he says, Life is either totally meaningless or totally meaningful, depending on what death is.

And so he shares the story of a conversation that he heard between a boy and his mother. And so the seven-year-old boy's cousin had suddenly died tragically and unexpectedly and the cousin was three years old.

And so the seven-year-old boy said to his mother, Where is my cousin now? And his mother didn't believe in God. She didn't believe in life after death. And so she couldn't in all good conscience say that his cousin was in heaven.

[1:08] And so she used her very best secular wisdom to be as honest as she could be with her son. And she said this, Your cousin has gone back to the earth where we all came from.

All of nature is a cycle. Death is a natural part of that cycle. When you see the earth put forth new flowers next spring, you can know that your cousin's life is fertilizing those flowers.

Can you imagine how the seven-year-old responded to his mother's answer? Well, he screamed.

And he said, I don't want him to be fertilizer.

And he ran away. And Kreeft makes the point that no matter how much this world regards death as natural, we can't suppress that human instinct that death is not natural at all.

We don't want to be no more than recycled fertilizer, do we? And we actually don't feel that way either. Death doesn't feel natural.

[2:12] If you stood at the graveside of a loved one, death doesn't feel natural. However normal and biologically necessary it might be. And so the question for us today as we come to this text is, So how should we cope with death?

Well, we can only honestly cope with death and hopefully cope with death if we see death in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because in this passage, Jesus not only tells us the truth about death, and nor is he grieved just by the sadness of death, which he is, but Jesus has something more to offer.

Jesus has power over death. Jesus is the answer to the greatest problem facing the human race.

And so when it comes to making sense of death, either our own death or the death of others, we will be best helped by Jesus, by listening to what he has said, and by looking at his life and what he has done.

We need to hear what he's got to say, and we need to receive what he wants to give. And this is beautifully displayed for us and explained to us in John chapter 11, the story of Lazarus, where Jesus doesn't just claim to be the resurrection and the life.

[3:34] He proves he will give resurrection and life. And not just for Lazarus, but for all who will believe in him. And so let's discover how this happens.

A few things to look at this afternoon as we look at this passage. The control of Jesus, the claim of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, the command of Jesus, and the course for Jesus.

First of all, the control of Jesus. In verse 1 to 16. And we see the control of Jesus in the way that he deliberately delays going to Lazarus, who was ill.

Did you spot that? He waits until Lazarus is dead. So just look at verse 6. It says there, So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days.

Now that might seem strange, because if you or I get the call from somebody that a loved one is ill, or especially nearing death, whether a family member or a friend, then you just drop everything, and you go to be with that person.

[4:38] So why wouldn't Jesus? Well, there's a reason for his deliberate delay. And it's not that Jesus didn't care, because John tells us twice that Jesus loved Lazarus. So Lazarus was a good friend of Jesus.

We're told that in verse 11. And Jesus loves his sisters, Martha and Mary. So he's a good family friend. So they surely expected Jesus to come ASAP.

But he doesn't. Why? Well, Jesus gives the primary reason there in verse 4. When he heard this, Jesus said, This illness will not end in death.

No, it is for God's glory, so that God's Son may be glorified through it. So the raising of Lazarus is to reveal God's glory, and to glorify God's Son, Jesus.

So it's a sign. And remember, we've said that the Gospel of John has lots of signs. And the first half of the Gospel of John is sometimes referred to as the Book of Signs, chapters 1 to 12.

[5:40] And there are seven of them. And then the second half of John's Gospel has been called the Book of Glory. And so here we are at the climax of the Book of Signs before we move on to the Book of Glory, where Jesus raising Lazarus from death is the seventh and the final climatic sign.

And it's pointing us to God's glory and glorifying Jesus so that we'll believe in him. And so Jesus is in total control of the circumstances here.

And so his delay guarantees that when Jesus gets there, Lazarus is well and truly dead. In fact, by the time Jesus shows up, he'd been dead four days.

But Jesus intends to raise Lazarus to life. And so the delay suggests that God's glory will shine out all the more gloriously than would have been the case if Jesus hadn't delayed.

And so the story of Lazarus doesn't just tell us what Jesus does for him. It's telling us who Jesus is. Because raising Lazarus from death is as easy for Jesus to do as it is for us to wake someone up from their sleep.

[7:00] Unless they're a teenager. It's a bit harder. And so verse 11 tells us, After he had said this, he went on to tell them, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up.

But we hear the further reason Jesus controls this situation, why he does it this way, verse 14 and 15. So then he told them plainly, Lazarus is dead, and for your sake, that's the disciples, I'm glad I was not there so that you may believe, but let us go to him.

So Jesus wants his disciples to believe. It's not that they didn't already believe. They did. So Jesus must mean that raising Lazarus from death will deepen or strengthen their belief, their faith in him.

So there's more they needed to learn about who Jesus is and what Jesus could do. Their faith in Jesus had to continue to grow as they saw him in action, just like our faith needs to grow too.

But there's another indication of Jesus' control here because this episode is charting the course towards the death of Jesus. And his disciples hint at this. So they're aware that the Jewish authorities want rid of Jesus.

[8:19] Verse 8. Rabbi, they said a short while ago, the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you're going back. And then again, verse 16. Let us go that we may also die with him.

So the disciples are aware. And of course, Jesus knows that going to Lazarus is deliberately putting himself in danger. And that's why John chapters 11 and 12 are the hinge that turns us into the second half of John's gospel, because it's the giving of life to Lazarus that means the giving up of the life of Jesus to die.

And so this is a deadly delay by deliberate design. And it highlights the absolute total control of Jesus.

But before we move on, it also has a pastoral application for us. But this is not a pastoral application that we like very much, because what we definitely see here is beyond doubt that Jesus loves us just like he loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary.

So please don't miss this. But there will be times of difficulty, times of distress, times of pain, sadness, illness, suffering, even death.

[9:43] And yet Jesus doesn't always sort things out immediately. He might deliberately delay instead. In other words, Jesus isn't working according to my timetable or your timetable.

He's working according to his own, which is actually far better than ours, even if we don't realize it at the time. So his control means he's not simply working for our good or what we think is our good.

He is working for God's glory. Where any delays, when connected with our life, enable God's glory to shine out all the brighter for those delays.

And of course, we don't always see that or even feel that at the time. And so let's not misjudge the situation or misjudge our circumstances by thinking that Jesus isn't in control because he is. Instead, let's trust him because he knows what he's doing. And we see that here at the end of this story. So that's the first point, the control of Jesus. The second is the claim of Jesus in verse 17 to 27.

[10:58] The claim of Jesus is clear. Verse 25, I am the resurrection and the life. And so when Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days.

Verse 17, Martha's the first one to meet Jesus. What does she say? Verse 21, 22. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask. You sense the disappointment in Martha's words that Jesus just hadn't been there earlier. She's got the faith to believe that Jesus could have stopped him dying.

But she's not expecting that Jesus is going to raise him from the dead. But Jesus has a plan for Lazarus. Verse 23, Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again.

Now just notice how Jesus ministers to Martha. Because how he ministers to Martha is different from the way he ministers to Mary a bit later on.

[12:05] So he doesn't mess about with Martha. He tells her exactly what is going to happen. Lazarus will rise from death. And yet Martha's not on the same wavelength as Jesus here.

Verse 24, Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Now she's talking about the final resurrection at the end of history.

So she knows the truth. She's got the propositional logic of the resurrection down. She's got it. She understands. Because the Jewish belief was that there would be a resurrection of all people at the last day, the day of judgment.

And it's spoken about a number of times in the Old Testament. Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel. So Martha is essentially stating the common belief that all Jewish people knew.

She expects Lazarus to rise at the end of time. But Jesus isn't talking about the then and there in the future. He's talking about the here and now.

[13:12] He's not simply promising the resurrection. He is the resurrection. And so he makes this astonishing claim about himself. Verse 25 and 26, 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? It's another one of those I am statements of Jesus, isn't it?

It's the fifth one. I am the resurrection and the life. And it's a massive claim because Jesus is not only saying he can raise Lazarus from the dead, which of course he can.

He has resurrection power. But Jesus is saying that he is the source of resurrection life. He is God the Son who gave life in the first place.

And so of course he can bring life out of death. And of course he can give eternal life because he's God. And so death is no problem to the one who is the source of life.

[14:15] That's why Jesus is the only answer to death. That's why Jesus can raise Lazarus right now. And so Jesus challenges Martha. His pastoral approach to Martha, again, is different from Mary.

He challenges Martha by saying, do you believe this? He's pushing her, not just to believe in the resurrection, but to believe in him. Not just to believe in the doctrine of the resurrection, which everybody, it seems, did, all the Jewish people, but to believe in the person of the resurrection.

Jesus who says he is the resurrection and the life. And Martha does believe, verse 27. Yes, Lord, she replied, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.

Notice Martha's response. It's expressed in the very words that John later gives as the very reason why he wrote his gospel. Remember John chapter 20, verse 31.

He wrote, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name.

[15:30] Which is the application for us too, isn't it? We must believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, if we want the resurrection life that he promises.

Which is more than simply believing a truth, propositional truth, or a doctrine. It's about believing in the person of Jesus and by believing in him, experiencing the life that he gives.

Eternal life. Which is life in all its fullness now, plus life forevermore in the world to come. So Jesus, when we believe in him, doesn't just transform us in the then and there. high in the sky when you die, but in the here and now. In your life experience. In how you live your life.

In how you face death and cope with death. In fact, in how you cope with everything. Because at the end of the day, it's your belief in Jesus that makes all the difference in the world to your life and your death and your destiny.

[16:42] And so when your family and friends turn up at your funeral and they grieve with sadness, their grief will either be filled with hope because in Jesus you will triumph over death and rise to everlasting life or their grief will be filled with hopelessness hopelessness.

Because without Jesus you will go to everlasting destruction. And we've all been at both kinds of funerals, haven't we? One is joyful whilst we still grieve at the loss of our loved one.

But the other one is joyless and depressing and sad. And that's why the claim of Jesus, I am the resurrection and the life matters. It matters right now for every single one of us because we don't just know when we'll die.

Nobody really knows when they'll die. But whenever we do die we want to meet death. Knowing the one who has conquered death for us, Jesus Christ.

Because only then will we enjoy resurrection life forever. Okay, so we've got the control of Jesus, second the claim of Jesus, and then more quickly the compassion of Jesus.

[18:05] Thirdly, verse 28 to 37. Just see the deep emotion of Jesus that is so strong here. I don't think you in anywhere else in the Gospels do you see the strength of the emotion of Jesus.

And it's seen in his response to Mary, first of all, as well as obviously in the death of Lazarus. And so look at verse 32. Mary goes to meet Jesus 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. Mary greets Jesus in the exact same way with the exact same words that Martha met Jesus.

And like Martha she expresses her faith in Jesus to heal Lazarus. But also like Martha she expresses her anguish that Jesus just wasn't here to save her brother.

But notice that Jesus ministers to Mary differently than to Martha. So if we say Jesus responded to Martha with the truth Jesus responds to Mary with tears which teaches us something significant about Jesus.

[19:17] I think this episode beautifully expresses the reality that Jesus is fully God and fully man. Fully God because he has the power over death but fully man because of his powerful emotion when faced with death.

We see his divine nature and his human nature in his interactions with these two grieving sisters. Just look at the emotional life of Jesus we could call it in verse 33 to 35.

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.

Jesus wept. He's touched by Mary's tears and he sheds his own tears. And then others in verse 36 saw how much Jesus was moved and how much he loved Lazarus.

his humanity full humanity is on display here, isn't it? Not just outwardly but inwardly as well. And again there in verse 38 Jesus once more deeply moved came to the tomb.

[20:34] Twice we're told Jesus was deeply moved. Now interestingly this expression deeply moved is one word in the original Greek but it expresses something much stronger than our English translation suggests because outside of the New Testament apparently this word could refer to the snorting of horses.

You know when horses snort they're kind of angry. And so when it's applied to human beings it means anger. It means indignation. It means outrage.

So Jesus is furious here. Or the Glasgow Gospel translation might put it he is pure raging. He is bellowing with anger.

But why? Why would Jesus be so angry? Well his anger is toward the sin and death that he sees around him. He is furious at the effects of sin and he is grieved because sin has resulted in the death of one of his best friends Lazarus.

And it's good that Jesus is angry isn't it? He is rightly angry at the way that sin and death have ravaged every part of this world and every life in it.

[21:58] Because this isn't how things were meant to be. So that sense of dissatisfaction of the way the world is is good because it's telling us, well no, this is not how it should be.

Death was not part of God's good design in the beginning. God did not create a world that was full of illness, pain, suffering and death. It's because death is an intruder into our lives.

It's a consequence of the fall. Death entered the world when our first parents turned away from God. We weren't created to die nor endure all that comes with death like ageing, frailty, weakness. You know what I'm talking about, right? As you get old, you feel it. Separation from loved ones when they die. That's not how it was ever supposed to be. Death is our enemy and Jesus knows this.

He understands the pain of death. That's why he is incensed, raging against sin and death and evil and suffering. But thankfully, Jesus can do something about it.

[23:11] He came to deal with death and reverse the effects of sin in this broken and fallen world because it's through Jesus' own death and resurrection that he destroys death for good.

But before we go there though, don't miss the compassion of Jesus here. Jesus, the perfect human, responds with incredible tenderness to his people.

It is lovely. It shines through in his reaction to the grief of Mary and the death of Lazarus. And so it should remind us of the tender care and compassion that Jesus has for you and me.

Jesus knows how you feel. Jesus is moved by your pain and sorrow and grief. Jesus wept with Mary.

Jesus weeps with you and me because he hates sin. He hates death and the way that they just ruin and spoil our lives.

[24:23] And so know that Jesus is with you, that Jesus loves you, that he cares for you, that he is compassionate and kind and with you.

So that's the compassion of Jesus, the control of Jesus, the claim of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, and then fourthly, the command of Jesus in verse 38 to 44. The command is obvious in how Jesus raises Lazarus from death.

So first he orders the stone to be taken away from the tomb, then Jesus prays to the father, verse 41 and 42, and he does all this so that the people will believe.

And then we get this simple command of Jesus and Lazarus comes to life. Now interestingly some of the older commentators suggest that Jesus addresses Lazarus by name, Lazarus come out, because if he didn't use the name Lazarus, then all the dead would come out of their graves at his mighty command.

And I don't know about that, but the raising of Lazarus fulfills Jesus' earlier words in John chapter 5 where he said, 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 hear will live.

[25:46] All who are in the graves will hear his voice and come out. What's happening here? Lazarus hears the voice of the Son of God. He comes out and he is alive. And so this is the climatic and greatest sign.

But here's the thing, Lazarus would die again. And yet his individual resurrection shows who Jesus is and what Jesus can do.

Shows it to the people at the time and it shows it to us that Jesus is the Son of God who has power over death. And so this gives us a preview of Jesus' own death and resurrection which will bring about a future resurrection for Lazarus and for all who believe.

Because Jesus not only raises us from our spiritual death to newness of life in the world right now but he'll raise us to resurrection life in the world to come.

That's the command of Jesus. And then fifthly, the control of Jesus, the claim of Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, the command of Jesus and then finally the course for Jesus. The course for Jesus had already been set.

[27:00] God's plan was always the death and resurrection of Jesus but the outcome of this sign really sets the stage for this. For Lazarus to live, Jesus had to die.

And John alerts us to this by using the word therefore there in verse 45. He's linking the raising of Lazarus with the coming death of Jesus.

Verse 45. Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. Okay, so many believe in Jesus, of course, because of what they see Jesus do, raise a man from death and yet the opposition from the religious authorities gets stronger and so they call a meeting of the Sanhedrin that is the highest Jewish court and this moves circumstances towards the death of Jesus. The authorities realize that Jesus' miracles make him more dangerous than ever. Verse 48, Caiaphas, if we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.

[28 : 24] So that's Caiaphas, the high priest, and he says there it's better for one man to die for the people and for the whole nation to perish. Now the irony is his words were about the best way to deal with Jesus, to kill him, but he's actually speaking better than he knows.

Verse 51 and 52, he did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation, but also for the scattered children of God to bring them together and make them one.

He has unwittingly prophesied the substitutionary death of Jesus, and he's spot on as far as what Jesus' death would achieve.

Because Jesus would die in the place of his people so that they would not perish. And Jesus' death would give life to all who believe.

And so can we see here just the divine sovereignty and human responsibility existing perfectly together? So verse 53, our last verse we read earlier, so from that day on they plotted to take his life, which was no surprise for Jesus.

[29 : 46] Jesus knew that the raising of Lazarus from death would take him closer to his own death. Where commanding Lazarus to come out of the grave was to put himself into the grave.

But that's why Jesus came. He came to defeat death, to raise us from our spiritual death and our physical death through his own death on the cross.

He died in our place for our sin so that he could end sin and death without ending us. That's why Jesus is the only answer to the problem of death.

Let me try and illustrate this. Fourteen years ago, Ulster rugby player Nevin Spence and his father Noel and his brother Graham tragically lost their lives in a farming accident.

You probably heard about it in Northern Ireland. And the Ulster rugby chaplain, called Andrew Thompson, he paid tribute by saying this. He said, And whatever else changes, their God and Nevin's God doesn't change.

[30 : 54] His love, his presence, his comfort are the constants in a world of change. These three Spence men, above everything else, lived their lives for God and they met their deaths in God.

In fact, faith in Jesus alone prepared them to enter into a reward in heaven that will never change or fade away. It is that truth which gives hope to cut through the pain of this loss.

It is that hope which sustains Nevin's family and friends. And it can be your hope too, however dark or desperate your circumstances might be today.

Chaplains say some great things. So how do you cope with death? You can't be in denial. You'll die. We will all die unless Jesus returns first.

But you don't need to be in despair either. You can live with hope in the one who defeated death for you. Because after Jesus died, he smashed through death.

[31 : 59] death. And he says to you those exact same words that he said to Martha. 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? May it be so.

Let's pray. Thank you God for the words of Jesus which give us hope, the only hope, in the face of death. We thank you that Jesus not only tells us how to face death and how to cope with death, but he proves that he has power over death by raising this dead man Lazarus to life again, but also by coming back to life after death so that through faith in him we will follow in his trail through death and onwards to resurrection life.

And so we pray our God that in the grief and sadness and pain of death you would help us to live as people who have hope. Hope because our saviour has conquered death for us.

We give our thanks in his name. Amen.