

The Glory of God, in the face of Death

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Heather. If you've got the Bible with you, it'd be worth keeping it open as we make our way through that passage. Perhaps the key question each week when we have this privilege of looking at God's Word, the most valuable thing the world affords, as we saw earlier, the key question that we want to answer is, what is God saying through this particular part of His Word?

Or as we start a new section, as we are doing this morning, John chapters 11 and 12, as they hold together, what is it that we're supposed to learn from this section that we're looking at? What is it that God is communicating to us here?

That's a big question, sometimes a tricky question. That's a question that a lot of weeks takes a lot of my time, kind of getting ready for the following Sunday. And so it's great when the answer to that question is right on the surface of a passage.

It's great when none other than actually Jesus Himself tells us what a certain section of the Bible is all about. And that's what happens here. If you've got a Bible there in front of you, do have a look at verse 4 of John chapter 11.

It says, But when Jesus heard it, He said, Jesus here, Jesus himself gives us the lens for us to look at this passage through this incident.

[1 : 3 6] These verses are here so that we can see God's glory and see the glory of His Son, Jesus Christ.

That's what this passage, this record of this historical event is here to teach us. And actually, it's going to be a big theme as we carry on in the next couple of chapters of John, to show us God's glory and that Jesus might be glorified in that.

So that is our aim this morning. It's quite a grand aim, isn't it? We're here this morning to see God's glory. That's what we want the result of looking at this passage to be. I don't know what comes to mind for you when you think of the glory of God.

Maybe it's a kind of, you know, beautiful cathedral, you know, like Westminster Abbey at the coronation yesterday. It's not quite the same here, but, you know, it's close. Maybe it's amazing scenery.

Perhaps it's kind of the wonder of the night sky. And the Bible tells us that the heavens declare the glory of God. And yet you'll have noticed as we read this passage that none of those things feature here in John chapter 11.

[2 : 4 3] No, this passage takes place at a funeral. This is an event that is surrounded by tears. This is a moment where Jesus is facing death itself head on.

This passage, and again, a big theme in the rest of John's gospel is that actually the glory of God and the glory of his son, Jesus Christ, is best seen, is most fully demonstrated in the face of death itself.

And the glory of God is best seen in light of that universal human experience, the suffering and sorrow that it brings of death itself.

We heard last week from a very different part of the Bible, Corey, who was visiting us from North Carolina, talking about how God, how the gospel of Jesus makes all the difference in times of burnout or exhaustion or stress.

In some ways, it's as if in this passage we go a level deeper still and we see actually even in death itself, the gospel changes everything. The gospel transforms how we look at our world and brings us hope at that point where nothing else can.

[4 : 04] So let's get stuck into these verses, which, as we just said, deal with the biggest issues we can imagine, the reality of death and the glory of God. It's a big passage. We won't be able to cover everything, but I think a good route for us to take through is by focusing really on the three individuals that Jesus speaks to and the lessons that his words to each one reveal.

So let's look first at Jesus' interaction with Martha. And what we're going to see here is that Jesus promises life. That in the face of death, Jesus promises life.

Jesus approaches the village of Bethany where this all takes place. And we read that Martha comes out to him in verse 21. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

It's an amazing statement that really that Martha is convinced that Jesus could have done something about this. Martha has seen Jesus do incredible things. She is sure that he could have healed her brother Lazarus, but he wasn't there.

He didn't come immediately. We read he waited actually an extra two days where he was, and now it's too late. Lazarus has died. Martha is still kind of expectant.

[5 : 24] She's still looking ahead to this future resurrection, isn't she? Verse 23, Martha still has, to some extent, this understanding that perhaps death isn't the end, that God will do something about it, that there is more.

But it all feels a long way away. This resurrection on the last day feels incredibly distant perhaps as her brother lies in the tomb.

And it is in that context, isn't it, that Jesus says these incredible words, these famous words of verse 25. Jesus said to her, 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. Martha has been looking ahead, as it were, looking into the distance, the resurrection on the last day, she says.

She's looking forward. And yet Jesus is telling her that with his coming, that day is now. Martha is looking forward to God doing something about the brokenness of our world, ultimately about death itself, the ultimate sign of that brokenness.

[6 : 45] Jesus says that it is through him that God is doing that. It is through Jesus that God is dealing with death itself. He is the resurrection she's waiting for.

He is the life. And all who believe in him, he says, will receive that eternal life. Here is the answer to death, the answer that Martha is looking for.

It's an incredible statement, incredible what Jesus says to Martha. And the stark fact is actually that each one of us, just as Martha was kind of looking for that answer, each one of us need to be able to deal with that question of death, don't we?

It is something perhaps the vast majority of us, if not all of us, will have been touched by to some degree. It is absolutely something that all of us will come face to face with one day.

Martin Luther King, speaking at a funeral, once put it like this. He said, there is an amazing democracy about death. It is not an aristocracy for some of the people, but a democracy for all of the people.

[7 : 56] Kings die and beggars die. Rich men die and poor men die. Old people die and young people die. Death comes to the innocent, and it comes to the guilty. Death is the irreducible common denominator of all men.

He's saying there that death is something that we will all face. Death is something that all of us need to have an answer to. And yet King continued there by saying, I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity's affirmation that death is not the end.

Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads man into eternal life.

How was Martin Luther King able to offer hope standing at a funeral? How can any minister do that? This was actually a funeral of three very young girls who died a horrific death.

How could he offer hope in that situation? It was because he knew that Jesus was the resurrection and the life. He wasn't speaking vaguely about death as a door into another room, but as death is a door to life eternal, made possible through Jesus, because the resurrection and the life has come.

[9 : 19] It has come as a person. It has come in Jesus. God has done something about death, and he has done that through his son, Jesus Christ. And we're going to see in just a moment the evidence of that.

We're going to see the proof of that. But in this first encounter, we see Jesus bringing this truth to Martha that because of him, death is no longer the end. There is certain hope for those who trust in him, and the gospel offers an answer to the universal question of death, that Jesus promises life.

And so hold that thought. We're going to come back to that in just a moment. Jesus promises life. He promises it to Martha. He promises it to us. But let's keep moving through this passage. As we see next, Jesus is meeting with Martha's sister, Mary.

So this is verse 28 onwards, if you've got your Bibles in front of you. Martha returns home, and Mary this time goes out to meet Jesus. Verse 32, She falls at his feet, and weeping, she makes exactly the same statement to him as her sister had done just moments earlier.

Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Exactly the same words. And what is so telling is that although the question, or at least the statement, that she makes is the same, that Jesus doesn't give the same response.

[10 : 46] Jesus doesn't speak about resurrection. Jesus doesn't speak about what's to come. Instead, we read verse 33, as Jesus sees Mary and those weeping with her, he is deeply moved.

To the point where verse 35, the shortest verse in the Bible, Jesus wept. Jesus wept. Jesus wept. We see Jesus' interaction with Mary, and we see that from the very depth of his soul, that Jesus understands suffering.

Jesus recognizes the sorrow that death brings, and not only that, but he feels that sorrow himself as well. Jesus weeps with Mary. Jesus weeps alongside Mary, and those others who are weeping as well.

I wonder if we look at this passage, the way it's put together, in some ways, these verses, this event could so easily have gone straight from Jesus declaring that he is the resurrection and the life to Martha to bringing this resurrection and life to Lazarus.

Those kind of two pieces fit together just like pieces like a jigsaw puzzle. So why is there then this kind of central piece, apart from the fact this is how it happened, but what do we learn from John recording about Jesus' meeting with Mary in the middle here?

[12 : 08] Well, we learn, don't we, as we think about the glory of God in the face of death itself, we learn here that Jesus understands suffering, that actually death hurts, because death is not the way that things are supposed to be.

That word there, verse 33, it says Jesus is deeply moved. It comes again in verse 38, as Jesus approaches Lazarus' grave, he was deeply moved.

That word doesn't just simply mean sad, it doesn't just mean that Jesus felt quite emotional, it really kind of means indignant. You can see that in a little footnote down at the bottom of the church Bibles.

That's a word in the Greek, it carries a sense of anger, of anger, of outrage almost. It's used as the kind of, in another form, as the kind of the snarling of animals. And so we might think, well, surely Jesus knows he's going to raise Lazarus.

Why is he so bothered? Why is he so sad? The point is, this isn't Jesus sad at the death of a friend, but rather this is Jesus indignant at the intrusion of death as a whole into his world.

[13 : 17] This is Jesus' recognition that this is not how things should be. That because of sin, because of sin entering God's good creation, there is now the suffering and the sorrow of death, but that is never how it was designed to be.

And so Jesus weeps. Jesus understands Mary's suffering. He understands our suffering and the sorrow that death brings. Because Jesus knows this is not how things were supposed to be.

Because at the deepest level, death is not natural. Death is not good. Death was not there at the beginning. It's when God proclaimed everything just so.

It's so important that we remember that. That if or when death is something that affects us, the time when it touches your family or your friends or your colleagues, or even when it's just that we're kind of moved as we see it on a television screen, even though it might be about something a long way away.

When we see that and when we feel how that is not right, when we have that great sorrow about that, we don't need to be ashamed of that. We don't need to try and kind of hide that or put that away.

[14 : 36] What we're actually feeling there, we're just getting a taste of what Jesus himself felt about death. Christianity is not a faith of a kind of a stiff upper lip, of having to put a positive spin on everything, of answering every question by saying that we're fine.

Christianity says it will be fine in the end. There is resurrection. There is life. But it also says in the meantime, there is hardship. And that hurts.

And that there is death. And that breaks our hearts. And yet Jesus draws alongside Mary. Jesus draws alongside us in that hardship. Jesus understands our suffering.

Jesus weeps with us. I think there's something incredibly deep, incredibly fundamental here about how we relate to one another.

We are not Jesus. There are things Jesus can do that we cannot do. We'll see that very clearly in just a moment. But we can learn from Jesus how he deals with people such as Martha and Mary.

[15 : 42] That we would be people who, like Jesus, offer truth, who point forward to the certain hope of eternity, that Jesus, that the resurrection and the life promises, that Jesus makes possible.

And yet again, that we would be willing to do that with tears. that we would allow people to be open about the hardship, the anguish they feel and nowhere more so than in the face of death itself as in this chapter.

That we would be open about our own sorrows and struggles rather than trying to present ourselves as someone unaffected by real life. We want to be a church who welcome broken people in their brokenness, who recognize the challenge of living in a fallen world because Jesus, who we follow, was not unaffected by real life and neither are we.

And yet this passage gives us that great comfort that even in the midst of that, because of that, Jesus understands our suffering. So there we go.

We see Jesus' interactions with Martha and then Mary, the two sisters of Lazarus. We see Jesus say some incredible things.

[17 : 02] But let's look thirdly at Jesus' interaction with Lazarus, the dead man himself. Here is the climax of this story. Really, this is the climax of John's gospel so far.

Let me read from verse 38. It says this, Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave and a stone lay against it.

Jesus said, Take away the stone. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, by this time there will be an odour for he has been dead four days. Jesus said to her, Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?

So they took away the stone. As we've seen already, Jesus has made some incredible claims. I am the resurrection and the life.

He said that standing in a funeral. And yet we know, can't we, that actually talk can be cheap. And so here, we see if Jesus actually can back that up.

[18 : 09] If that future hope he offers is really based on the truth, is really based on reality. In some ways, as we get to the end of these verses, this is like a kind of a heavyweight boxing clash.

How does somebody become crowned the undisputed champion of the world? Why are boxing fans kind of desperate for this fury against Usak match? Well, it's because it's only by the biggest and the strongest meeting one another that you can have that undisputed champion.

It's only by beating the best, by coming up against the strongest opponent in the ring that someone can truly prove themselves as the number one. And until then, whatever people might say, and a lot of boxers have an awful lot to say, there are always question marks because talk can be cheap.

And well, here is Jesus not backing away, but coming face to face with that ultimate universal enemy, that ultimate intrusion into God's good creation of death itself, that ultimate cause of suffering and sorrow in our world.

Here is the heavyweight clash. And as Jesus speaks those incredible words to a dead man, Lazarus, come out, we see the incredible proof of his power, of his victory.

[19 : 33] Verse 44, the man who had died came out. His hands and feet bound with linen strips, his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go.

You know, we said that this whole passage, in fact, Jesus himself said this whole event was for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Well, here we see God's glory as Christ has triumphed over, has authority over, even death itself.

Here we see God's glory as we see that the grave will not have the final word. Here we see God's glory that the tears that Mary cries, that each one of us cry, will be wiped away and the truth of the certain hope of resurrection and life will stand for eternity.

There is the glory of God and his Son, Jesus Christ, in full display. And it perhaps leaves us, does it, with the question how?

How was Jesus able to raise Lazarus? How is Jesus able to have authority over death? How can we speak about him in any meaningful way today being the resurrection and the life when it seems like death still has such a hold on our world?

[20 : 58] It is still a sorrow and a struggle that we face. And the answer really to that question is that Jesus could only bring Lazarus out of the tomb as this picture, as this demonstration of his victory because Jesus himself was going to go into the tomb.

Throughout this chapter, Jesus, the danger that Jesus is willingly entering into and going to Lazarus is emphasized. Verse 8, the disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you and you are going there again.

Verse 16, Thomas said to his fellow disciples, let us go that we may die with him. They're under no illusions as to how dangerous the situation is. Jesus is deliberately going into the lion's mouth.

And actually we'll see that confirmed next week. Verse 53, so from that day, this day of the raising of Lazarus, they, that is that the religious leaders and authorities, they made plans to put him to death.

Jesus brings Lazarus life because he goes to his death. And in that way, really, this event is a picture on a local scale of Jesus' whole mission on earth.

[22 : 13] He left his place of safety, his heavenly home, to come to the world to face oppression, to be handed over to sinful man, to be crucified on a cross.

And just like with Lazarus, he did that so he could bring resurrection and life, but not just for one man, but for all mankind, for all those who would believe in him. And just like with Lazarus, he did that for, ultimately, for the glory of God.

And that is what Jesus did. And we can have confidence that that mission was a success because this incredible resurrection in the middle of John's gospel points us forward to an even greater resurrection at its conclusion, where Jesus having dealt with the penalty of sin on the cross, having dealt with, having won victory over, having won against the sin that brings death into our world, is then himself raised from the dead.

The proof that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and as he promises that resurrection and life to all that believe in him. And really that leaves us just with one final thing to say this morning.

We've seen Jesus interacting with Martha, with Mary, with Lazarus. I suppose we could call this last one. What is our interaction then with Jesus in light of what we see of him here?

[23 : 43] How are we to respond to this demonstration of God's glory and the glorification of his son, Jesus? And again, the answer to that question, the right response, is given right here in the passage.

Again, it is given by Jesus himself. Verse 15, Jesus says about Lazarus' death, for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.

And then verse 42, as Jesus prays immediately before raising Lazarus, he says to his father, I say this on account of the people standing around me that they may believe that you sent me.

This passage is all about the glory of God and that having seen that glory in his victory even over death itself, that we would believe in that God.

And that we would believe in Jesus Christ as the one he sent. The one who was going to do something about that ultimate issue of death that we all face.

[24 : 48] That having seen this knockout blow even over death itself, death that we are helpless in the face of, death that in our own strength we have no answer to, that we would believe that we need that help and that hope from outside of ourselves and we would believe in Jesus as the one who can offer that to us.

Only Jesus can deal with that sin that doesn't just stain our world but also stains our lives. That we believe in his sacrificial death in our place and that we would believe in his glorious resurrection paving the way for all those who would trust in him.

Perhaps for some this morning that is for the first time accepting Jesus' death in our place, believing he is who he said he is, that he did what he said he did, that he was successful in that, responding to that glory by submitting to him, recognizing our need of him, accepting that forgiveness that he promises for the first time.

Perhaps for the majority of us here we do have that trust in Jesus. What about us? How are we to respond to this incredible demonstration of God's glory that we are given here?

I think the response is that we're here to keep on believing, to be encouraged in our faith, and to keep living that out day by day, the key here is that the more we're able to see God's glory, the more we can live out our belief in him in every area of life, whatever the cost might be.

[26 : 24] In some ways, we put ourselves into the shoes of Lazarus. I'm sure not a day went by in the rest of his life where he wasn't grateful for Jesus. I'm sure there was nothing that would ever be too much trouble for him for Jesus, because he had experienced that incredible demonstration of Jesus' glory.

His life literally was down to Jesus, belonged to Jesus, and so he lived for him. Throughout the Bible, time after time, we are confronted with the glory of God.

The heavens declare the glory of God. The prophet Isaiah had this incredible vision, this revelation of the glory of God. The final book of the Bible, Revelation, is a book displaying the glory of God.

We see it here in John chapter 11, the glory of God and his son, Jesus Christ. Our natural tendency, if we're not careful, is to just make God smaller and smaller and smaller, until he just kind of fits alongside whatever we fancy doing.

But the Bible keeps on reminding us and pushing this message home of a glorious God, bigger than us, far beyond anything we can comprehend, that we might rightly respond and give our lives in worship of him.

[27 : 39] John shows us this huge picture of God, a God who is above and beyond everything else, and yet also the truth that this huge God has drawn close to us through Jesus.

Jesus who understands our suffering. Jesus who, through his own death and resurrection, is able to offer a hope which nothing else can.

Let's pray together. Amen. Amen.