

# Responding to Jesus

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] something happens or when someone new comes along that changes everything. When we were preparing for the birth of Louisa, our second child, the day was getting near. We started digging out all the various bits of baby stuff required that had previously been Emily's and had been snatched away in a cupboard somewhere. And I remember very clearly a very small baby seat that Emily had spent a lot of time in but was now clearly far too big for. And we were trying to explain to her, she would have been two at the time, that we'd got the seat out again because when the baby arrived it would be using her old seat. And Emily did not look amused. She kind of glared at this chair. She plunked herself down as heavily as she could into this little seat and just said, out the way baby. And so we were kind of, we weren't quite sure how she was going to deal with the new arrival. Perhaps you've had similar dynamics in your family or perhaps it's been, you know, you can have a similar thing in a work environment. You know, someone new has arrived or perhaps you've been that new person. It's meant a change, it's meant a reordering of things and people can respond to that kind of thing in different ways, more or less positively. What well, our passage this morning focuses on how the religious leaders of Jesus's day responded to someone new, to something incredible happening, which is the arrival of Jesus himself.

As Jesus arrives and everything changes, what would their attitude, what would their response be? And you probably picked up from that reading that Ross has just read for us. It's not a great response. It's not a positive response. And actually in that passage, we then see that particularly contrasted with Jesus himself as Jesus's death is brought into the picture.

And we'll be focusing on that as well. This passage, as Ross said, it follows directly on from what we looked at last week as we returned to John's gospel. A quick reminder that in the first kind of 44 verses of John chapter 11, we read about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

That's an incredible miracle of displaying the glory of God and of his son, Jesus Christ. We saw there that the right response to that was that people would believe, was that people would put their trust in Jesus as the only one who has the answer to death, who has won victory over death. And that's what we pick up this week, verse 45. Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him. And that is, they believed in Jesus. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. And so the Pharisees, who are kind of the part of the religious authorities at the time, they are brought into the picture. They are made aware of this incredible resurrection miracle. And we see their response. And we're going to look at that. We're going to look at this passage in two halves, really. First looking at these religious leaders, their response, their attitude, their priorities. And then we will look at Jesus and see the incredible contrast that he offers brought into the sharpest of focuses through his death on the cross.

So let's look first then at the Pharisees and at the religious authorities. Having heard what Jesus has done, this incredible life-bringing, glory-displaying miracle, raising Lazarus from the dead. They gathered the council. They gather all the kind of religious leaders of the day. And they ask in verse 47 there, what are we to do? What are we to do, they say. How should they respond to what is happening? How should they respond ultimately to Jesus? Well, actually, as we've just said, we know what they should do, shouldn't they? They should believe. They should be excited that the one promised by God, the one they were actually supposed to be preparing the people for, that the Christ was here.

[ 4 : 27 ] These of all the people should have recognized and responded rightly. But instead, their response is a negative response, isn't it? It's a response of fear. They say, what are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. And they recognize Jesus is doing these incredible signs, signs that would make people believe, and yet they are desperate to keep a lid on that. And really, I think there's two kind of key reasons behind that, that it's worth us looking at. Reasons where we can learn lessons for ourselves, and also learn lessons for those we know who would love to come and trust in Jesus, who would love to respond by believing in him. Two key reasons here that we see why the religious leaders respond as they do. And the first is this, that they had already made up their mind on Jesus. They've already decided that they were not interested, that ultimately that he was dangerous or not to be trusted, that they were on one side and he was on the other side. Right back in chapter 5 of John's Gospel, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, and straight on, these leaders have set themselves against Jesus. And that antagonism had grown throughout the following chapters. Jesus heals a man born blind in chapter 8. Again, a great time for celebration, we would think. Actually, it just causes these religious leaders to cement their attitude against him. This hostility to Jesus grows despite the incredible signs he's been doing.

In John's Gospel, all the way through, the word John uses for miracle is that word sign. That all the miraculous events Jesus performed were signposts pointing to who he was. Signposts that couldn't make it any clearer. And yet these religious leaders had closed their minds to Jesus so much that even as they hear of this ultimate sign, Jesus raising the dead to life, their response isn't to say, well, maybe this is someone we should have another look at, or maybe we've been wrong about this. Maybe we should give this guy a hearing. Instead, they doubled down. And the result is, as it says there in verse 53, from that day on, they made plans to put him to death. They refused to listen. They refused to look where the signs are pointing to consider any other option about Jesus, that their minds are closed toward him. And I think in so many ways, we could say that remains a common situation in our day, that so many people have made up their minds on what they think about Jesus. They've made up their minds on what they think about Christianity. And often with very little of their own investigation, often very little kind of consideration of the evidence, and yet still are unwilling to challenge or change their views there. It's good to be aware of that in ourselves, that we can be more perhaps stubborn than we would like to be. It's good to be aware of that in other people as well.

Perhaps to be willing to encourage others, to rethink some of their ideas. That is something that's really kind of positively thought of in every other area of life, isn't it? Being open to new ideas, being willing to have your thoughts challenged. No one wants to be a kind of a stuck in the mud.

And so why would that not be the same with Jesus? I heard someone recently who he said that the question he would ask his friends was this, have you ever read the Bible as an adult? Simply say that, have you ever read the Bible as an adult? And for so many people, the biggest decision in their lives, what they think about Jesus, how they respond to Jesus, is a decision made without having engaged with that number one source of information about him. The Bible, which as we said, all points to Jesus.

The gospel accounts, like John, where we get this eyewitness report. So many people who haven't looked at that and yet they have made up their mind. They think they have their answer.

[ 8 : 48 ] This guy said that as he asked people that question, it led a number of times to people looking at the Bible with him, to people perhaps for the first time or perhaps considering afresh actually what Jesus himself had to say. And through that, again, a significant number making that decision to respond in belief, belief in Jesus. The comedian Lee Mack, who is not a Christian, he was on Desert Island Discs a while ago on Radio 4. I thought he was really open, really honest about this. He said, I'm glad you get the Bible. I think the idea is you're stuck on a desert island. You get to choose, you get the works of Shakespeare, you get a Bible, and then you can choose one other book to take with you. He said, I'm glad you get the Bible because I would read the Bible. He went on to say this, really interesting. I think it's quite odd that people like myself in their 40s quite happily dismiss the Bible, but I've never read it for myself. You know, incredible admission, and I'm sure that is common across a great number of people. Trying to get people to respond to Jesus often means helping people let go of their preconceived ideas about what Christianity is, about who Jesus was, about what the Bible says. And it's actually to encourage people to look afresh at the evidence God gives us, to look at that for themselves, not least in his word, the Bible.

If you find yourself in that position this morning, not actually having read the Bible for yourself, if that's something you'd be up for doing, willing to do, do come and chat to me, or anyone else that you see up here at the front or that you know here at church, but we would love to do that with you, to look at the Bible together and to see what it says.

If you've got friends or family who you're trying to engage in the gospel, it's a great question to ask. You know, have you really looked at this for yourself? Would you be open-minded enough to consider it and possibly change your mind? To look honestly and openly at Jesus. It's as simple as reading one of these gospel accounts and listening to Jesus on his own terms, seeing where it is that these signs point to. And yet again, back to our passage, that was something that the religious leaders were refusing to do. So that's the first reason they reject Jesus. Their minds are already made up. And yet then there is a second reason we see in this passage. And I think really this is even more significant in some ways. This is kind of the reason behind the reason, if you like. This is why they don't want to change their minds, is that the religious leaders have already, as well as having their minds made up, they've already got their priorities made up.

And we see that if we look at verse 48. Why are they afraid that other people will believe in Jesus? Why would that bother them? It goes on to say, if we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. A bit of history here, which I'm sure some of you will love, others not so much, but we'll be brief. That's okay.

In the time of Jesus's life, the first century, the Roman Empire is kind of the superpower of its day. It's swept across Europe. It's swept down into kind of northern Africa and over into the Middle East as well, including the land of Israel, which had been the historic home of God's people. But, and this is important to get this, the Jewish people had been allowed by the Romans to keep some sort of autonomy. They'd been allowed to keep on their land in some ways as their own. They'd been allowed to keep on worshiping their God rather than the Roman gods. They'd been allowed to hold on to the majority of their practices and their customs to keep on living as they wanted.

[ 12 : 44 ] And so the Jewish leaders in that have been able to hold on to some degree of power, of status. They have great influence over this state. And the danger they're worried about is that if there's a fuss, if significant things start happening, if things start changing, well then the Romans will come in and just kind of clamp down on all of that. It's too complicated, it's too difficult, it's too dangerous. You guys doing your own thing, you now need to be like everyone else. That nation would lose its special status and these religious leaders would lose their special positions. Now that's the kind of the history here, that's their concern. And the Greek in verse 43, it literally says, the Romans will take from us both the place and the nation. It is their own interests that these leaders are primarily concerned with. The question for them really is this, what is our priority? Do we really want to risk having everything turned upside down by following Jesus?

Do we want to risk everything that we have? Do we want to put our status, our reputation, our influence, our position on the line for this guy? Or would we rather just keep hold of what we have and stay at the top of this particular tree and get rid of Jesus? And they decisively choose the second. You know, their approach is that we don't want to lose what we have and so we will lose Jesus instead. He has to die, so that this nation and our position in it and over it can remain. And again, that is not a situation, that is not a mindset really that has gone away. Still, the fact remains that to choose Jesus, to accept Jesus, to respond in belief to Jesus is something that for each one of us changes everything.

It turns our world upside down. To believe in Jesus might mean giving everything. It means having him as our priority above everything else. It might mean us kind of lowering down the social levels slightly. It might mean us not kind of reaching the pinnacle of our ambitions. A fairly direct example of what we see in these verses, I suppose, is what we spoke about a couple of months ago with Kate Forbes. I remember she had just kept quiet about her Christian beliefs. She'd just been happy to kind of push to one side what the Bible teaches about marriage or sexuality or gender. I think most people have little doubt she would have won that SNP leadership race. She was ahead in the polls.

She was thought the most competent by most people within that party. She would have become the first minister. She would have reached really the pinnacle of her political career. And yet I was so impressed and so encouraged that she would prioritize Jesus, believing and following him, even though that cost her that worldly position. And that was something these priests, these religious authorities, were not willing to do. And our situation will be different. And yet still, to believe in Jesus is costly. It might affect our popularity. It might affect what people say about us at work. It might put us on the outside. It might change how we invest our time or our finances or our possessions or our energy. And Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him. Jesus says that in following him, our personal comfort or our personal goals or our personal kind of ideals are no longer our number one priority. Again, that is a price that the religious leaders of Jesus's day and many still today are not willing to pay. And yet, as we saw so clearly last week, as we read these verses in their context of chapter 11 and all that is going on, we saw last week that actually only Jesus can bring life.

Only Jesus can bring hope. Only Jesus can defeat death. That actually what Jesus offers makes everything else we might hold so tightly onto in this world pale into insignificance. None of us, if we were to start again and read all the way through John chapter 11, get to the end as we carry on into chapter 12 over the next few weeks, none of us will think, well, I think looking back, the Pharisees made a good call there.

[ 17 : 25 ] None of us think, yeah, that was the right thing to do. No, we can see that they are missing out on what is of eternal value, the kingdom of God, to hold on to their own little kingdoms and keep their own power. Their priorities are back to front. And so they miss out on the greatest gift in the world.

The encouragement for us this morning is not to do the same. When it comes to our lives, are we willing to make Jesus the priority, whatever the consequences that might bring? That is what it means to believe in him. And so there are the Pharisees and the religious leaders. There's their response that we see to Jesus. And having considered that, we now get the most incredible contrast, the most incredible counter-example. As these verses lead us now to focus in the second half of the passage on Jesus and specifically on Jesus's death and the purpose and the significance of that.

Let me read verse 49 and 50. It says, but one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, you know nothing at all, nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish. Really, this is kind of the head man, the top religious leader confirming that to protect their position, that their special status as a nation, Jesus has to go. He has to die. And yet we read on. John points out to us the incredible irony. He says, he did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation. And not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. We get this great demonstration of God's sovereign control, of God working out all things for his purposes. And so the priests think they are putting Jesus to death to get rid of him, to get their way, to hold on to their power. And we see actually this is God's plan all along, to rescue his people, to gather in his people, that amazing contrast where worldly power is so desperate to hold on to its status, its influence, its position, whatever the cost, whatever the cost to others, whoever needs to be pushed out the way to enable that to happen. And yet Jesus is willing to lay down his life for the salvation of others. Jesus will die for his people, not because it is something that is forced upon him, but because that was God's plan from the very beginning. And as we said last week, this section here, chapters 11 and 12, are kind of a bit of a bridge in the middle of John's gospel. They connect everything that's been before, particularly all of these signs pointing to who

Jesus is, with everything that comes after, particularly about the cross of Jesus Christ, which will be John's primary focus in the rest of this gospel. And we're given here, kind of ironically, in this unwitting prophecy by the high priest, where we're given, kind of looking forward to what's to come in this gospel, an outline of the significance of the cross, an outline of the significance of Jesus dying, and what it will achieve. And really two things highlighted for us to look at there as we focus in here, these verses focus in on Jesus's death. And the first thing is this, that it is a substitutionary death. The point is emphasized that Jesus will die for the nation. Jesus will die in the place of the people. And yet that doesn't mean to preserve a political nation or a geographical nation as Caiaphas, the high priest, had planned. It is actually on a spiritual level. Jesus dies as a sacrifice. Right back in chapter one of John's gospel, Jesus is pointed out, introduced as the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. And the cross is how Jesus will deal with that sin.

The Bible gives us various ways of speaking about Jesus's death and what it was about. It's described as a demonstration of God's love. It's described as an example of loving sacrificially others and serving them. It's described as a victory over sin and death. All of those are in the Bible. All of those are true. But all of them depend first and foremost on the fact that Jesus died as a substitute for us. And that first and foremost that Jesus died in our place. That is fundamental to how we understand the gospel. Jesus didn't grasp to hold on to power and status and push people out of the way in order to get that. But instead he laid down his power and status. He suffered for us. He suffered in our place. Why did he do that? Why was that necessary? Well again we saw last week, didn't we? Jesus's anger, Jesus's indignation at death coming into the world. That because of sin, because humanity as a whole and each one of us as part of that have rejected God's rule.

[ 22 : 58 ] And that because of that sadness and the sorrow of death has entered into God's good creation. And the Bible is clear that all of us are culpable for that. And we don't really like that idea. But actually if we're honest, we know that we haven't lived up to God's perfect standards. In fact, we've not even lived up to the kind of the slightly lower standards that we set for ourselves and for other people. There are plenty of things that we regret, plenty of things we're ashamed of, where we say, I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have thought that.

The Bible says actually that the consequences of that, of our turning our back on God, is that death lays a claim to us. That death has a hold over us. We have put ourselves, by rejecting God's rule, we have put ourselves under death's rule, under death's authority.

How then can we be saved? Well, only because Jesus dies that death for us. Only because Jesus dies as a substitute. He dies in our place.

This is perhaps most famously and maybe most brilliantly illustrated by C.S. Lewis in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, where Edmund, who's a bit of a brat really, he kind of double crosses his brother and his sisters, as well as Aslan, who is the kind of the great lion, the kind of Jesus figure in the Narnia series. And because of what Edmund has done, the evil white witch lays out her claim over him. And she says this, you know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey, and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill. His life is forfeit to me. His blood is my property. And to everyone's great surprise, really to the kind of horror of the group that are gathered around Aslan, that the hero agrees with the witch.

It is very true, said Aslan. I do not deny it. And yet there is then this discussion in secret between the witch and the lion, and after which he comes back. And he says, I have settled the matter.

[ 25 : 12 ] She has renounced the claim on your brother's blood. Well, how is it settled? How is that claim renounced? How can Edmund walk free after all he's done? Well, it's only because we find, as we read on, that Aslan has agreed to die in Edmund's place. The glorious and the innocent one dies so that the traitor might go free. And of course, the witch and all the other kind of evil beings in Narnia rejoice as he dies. They think he's won. They have maintained and confirmed their power. Actually, Aslan's death is the ultimate victory, which gets rid of this evil and wickedness once and for all.

It's such a brilliant and deliberate picture of the gospel, of Jesus, the glorious son of God, dying in the place of, as a substitute for his wayward people, in order that they might go free, that their debt having been paid. The death through which Jesus' opponents thought they would save their power is actually the victory through which he demonstrates his. And so Jesus dies as a substitute, so kind of fundamental that John wants us to see that. That is ultimately the ultimate answer to the question, well, how can we know God loves us? Well, we can know that because he gave absolutely everything for us. His death so that we could have eternal life, that the whole of the gospel revolves around the substitutionary death of Jesus.

And finally, beyond that then, John shows us that as well as Jesus' death being a substitute, in light of that, it is also, he says, it is the single event that will draw in God's people, all of God's people, from all the different places to him. Verse 52, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. While the religious leaders are kind of fixated on this national event, on their own people, their own race, their own power, actually we see here that the cross is the universal event that will draw in and that will offer forgiveness to people of every tribe and tongue and nation, that all God's people will be united by that single climactic event at the cross, where Jesus dies in our place. And how incredible it is that actually 2,000 years later, standing on the other side of the cross, we actually see that the truth of what John writes here, that in every corner of the globe, there are those who have trusted in Jesus, his death in their place, and have been brought into his family. That in a very real way, we here in Haddington are one with Christians in America, or China, or Nigeria, or Poland, or wherever else you care to mention. Because Christ's death in our place is the common foundation that has drawn us together. That is also the power behind and the motivation behind mission that takes the gospel to every corner of the world. Again, we pray regularly for the Patterson family and their work in Vietnam, and there are many others doing similar work in many places.

Because God has his people around the globe, and they'll be gathered in through Christ, gathered in through the cross. We are one with all of those people through Christ, if our trust is in him. And that also means finally that we are one with each other here this morning as well through Christ.

It's a great reminder that our unity is in him and in him alone, that he suffered in the place of each and everyone here in this room who has put their trust in Jesus, who has accepted his sacrificial death, the forgiveness of sins, the payment of our debt that that brings. And this passage gives us this brilliant contrast. Rather than the religious leaders of his day, and rather than, you know, if we are honest, our attitude is so prone toward kind of keeping on to power, keeping on to what is ours, putting us at the top. Jesus didn't seek to hold on to what was his, and yet suffered for others in order to gather us into him. As we hold on to the message of his death in our place, our prayer is that we would be moved to, we would be enabled to not to try and hold on to whatever power or influence or control or whatever it is that we want for ourselves. But instead, through that, we would have Christ as our priority. We would give everything to serve him. And through that, to love and serve one another as we are gathered into one as children of God through the sacrifice of Christ. Let's pray together.