

A Matter of Life and Death

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Date: 11 August 2024

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is from John 11, verses 45 to 54, and you can find that in your Bible at page 1078.

The plot to kill Jesus. 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. What are we accomplishing?

They asked. Here is this man performing many signs. 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.

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was the high priest that year, spoke up. You know nothing at all. You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish.

[1 : 13] 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 all the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.

So from that day on, they plotted to take his life. Therefore, Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead, he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.

When it was all... Oh, sorry. That was the end. This is the word of the Lord. Well, thanks be to God, and thanks, Matt, so much for reading.

Let me add my welcome as well to you. It's great to see you. If you're here visiting with us or here for the first time, we're absolutely delighted to have you with us.

We do hope to get to know as many of you as possible after the service of a tea and coffee. It'd be great help if you keep your Bibles open at John chapter 11. It's our third week in John chapter 11, and our final week in our present series in John's gospel.

[2 : 26] So let's ask for God's help as we get stuck into it. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

We pray that as we think about your word to us this morning, you would cause the gospel to shine brightly, that you would give life according to your words, and that you would meet us where we are.

Speak to each of us here. Address us even as you addressed Lazarus from the tomb, for us to come out of the darkness into the light.

So whatever trials we might be facing, whatever the days ahead might look for us, would you remind us of your great love for us. Would you incline our hearts to you, for we ask in Jesus' name, amen.

Well, I remember years ago, it must have been more than a decade ago now, that we were back at my parents' living room in the aftermath of my granny's funeral, my mum's mum.

[3 : 43] And there we were sitting around waiting for my dad to get back from the church, and he'd been kept back by something, and he'd given his keys to one of us.

So we were expecting him at any moment. And I remember my eldest niece being there. She'd have been very young at the time, too young to have attended her great-grandma's funeral.

Then all of a sudden, the doorbell rings. And so we all turn to Isla, my niece, and thinking it will cheer her up to have my dad, her grandpa, finally home from church.

We ask her, who do you think that is? Who could it be at the door? And I remember looking at my niece and seeing her face brightening as the possibility dawned on her in awe and wonder.

Great-grandma, she said. Such was her faith and understanding that she thought it was her recently deceased great-grandma who'd done a Lazarus, so to speak, turned up at the front door and was there buzzing on the doorbell back from the grave.

[4 : 59] Well, lo and behold, needless to say, it was my dad back from church. And so that might be a little bit of a silly story, but we would do well, I think, to share in that simple childlike faith that Isla has.

Now, perhaps you struggle with believing in the resurrection. Even as Christians, sometimes perhaps we struggle to believe.

Seems too good to be true. Well, let's just look back at chapter 11, verse 25. A key verse from a couple of weeks ago, and one of Jesus' most famous sayings.

Jesus said, Jesus said, Do you believe this?

And he says this in the context of one of his best friend's funerals. An extraordinary thing to say at a funeral.

[6 : 17] I can raise the dead if you believe in me. And then Jesus, he backs his chat by performing one of the most amazing miracles recorded.

He calls into the tomb, Lazarus, come out. And out he comes, the dead man raised to life. That's what we saw last week. And it sounds almost too good to be true.

Whoever believes in me, whoever believes in Jesus, will live, even though they die. It sounds too good to be true almost.

Believe in Jesus, new life begins. Now, naturally, we're skeptical. We ignore those text messages we receive promising a share of great fortune and wealth.

If only we'd hand over our bank account details for the dubious sender to transfer their money into. We roll up our eyes when we're sitting in a traffic jam. We see those laminated notices by the side of the road promising us extra thousands of pounds a month if we sign up to this or that.

[7 : 29] And we don't need to read the small print to know that it's a scam. And we've got an expression for it, don't we? If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is. So what about Jesus' claims? Whoever believes in me will have eternal life.

Sounds too good to be true, perhaps. So what's the catch? What does the small print say? What's the cost? And we're going to see this morning there is a cost.

A terrible cost. A cost too great for us to pay. But here's the thing. Here's the catch. We don't pay. In fact, the cost has already been paid and paid in full.

So we're going to see that John chapter 11 takes us right to the very heart of the gospel. It's not just the story of Lazarus' death to life.

- [8 : 31] It's the story of Jesus' life to death. So this is a great passage if you're here this morning and exploring the claims of the Christian faith for yourself.
- And it's also a great passage if you're here and you're already a Christian. And perhaps going on in the faith, perhaps a little weary even one way or another. This is a passage that reminds us of the bigness of Jesus' death and its invocations for our life.
- So at the end of John's gospel, end of chapter 20, very helpfully, it's up on the screen there, John gives us his big purpose statement. And he's recorded these miraculous signs for us, like raising Lazarus from the dead, so that you may believe in Jesus.
- And when it comes to Jesus, we've basically got two options. Belief or unbelief. We can either believe in Jesus, put our trust in him, who he is, what he's done, or we can reject him.
- And we see that played out here in this passage. So we just had this amazing historical event, amazing evidence of Jesus' power and authority over death itself. And then there's these two responses, belief and rejection.
- [9 : 55] Now we might expect, verse 45, many of the Jews who had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But the response of the others might be a little bit more unexpected.
- So some of them go and tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done. And the Pharisees decide to kill Jesus. Not necessarily the reaction you'd expect if you'd just witnessed someone who was definitely dead back to life.
- And if this happened now, you can imagine everyone on their mobile selfies with the man wrapped up in bandages, like a little clip of Lazarus perhaps going viral, him coming out of a tomb or something like that.
- A media circus would descend. But the reaction here of the Pharisees, not necessarily what you'd expect. The one who gives life is about to be killed.
- And by the way, we're going to see in our next section how Jesus' ability to give life results in his own death. His ability to give life and his own death are connected.
- [11 : 09] For Lazarus to live, Jesus must face death. And we've seen already a couple of weeks ago, there's already danger in the air.
- In verses 7 and 8 of chapter 11, Jesus' disciples think it's just madness for Jesus to go back to Judea, to go to Bethany. Because a short while ago, the Jews had tried to stone him there.
- And that doesn't stop Jesus going to Lazarus. So Jesus raises his friend from the dead and for his opponents, it's the last straw. Verse 47.
- You say, what are we doing? Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him.
- And so down to verse 53. From that day on, they plotted to take Jesus' life. And it's crazy, isn't it, when you think about it?
- [12 : 10] Like, oh no, what a disaster. Here's this Jesus going about performing these incredible miracles, even bringing someone back from the dead.
- If we let him go on like this, performing miracles, everyone will believe in him. It's the giving of life to Lazarus that results in death to Jesus.
- The final act that rallies opposition and sets in motion a chain of events that leads to Jesus' trial and execution. And it's illogical, isn't it?
- Let's kill the man who gives life. But basically, their logic, the Pharisees' logic, such as it is, goes like this. Jesus' miracle is so convincing, raising Lazarus from the dead.

It's so convincing that if word gets out, everyone's going to believe in him. Everyone's going to start following him. Everyone's going to start becoming Christians. Now let's take a note of this, because nobody here is denying that the miracle took place.

[13 : 19] Not even Jesus' enemies. They don't doubt that it took place. If they doubted it, if they thought the whole thing was just a kind of an elaborate hoax or something, they'd have used different tactics, wouldn't they?

No need to kill him. Simply discredit him. Disprove the miracle. In February of 1814, British Lord Thomas Cochran and his accomplice, Captain de Beranger, sparked mayhem at the London Stock Exchange with their audacious hoax.

And their scam began when de Beranger donned a military uniform and told people in Dover that he'd just come back from France, from Paris. And he said that Emperor Napoleon had just been killed and France was about to be defeated.

But the good news spread rapidly. And when London Stock Exchange opened the very next day, trading boomed, as you can imagine. And in anticipation of this, Cochran had stockpiled government bonds, which he duly sold at a great profit.

However, their elaborate hoax soon fell apart when Napoleon was proven to be alive and the financial fraud was exposed.

[14 : 45] But here in our chapter, the Pharisees can't expose Jesus as a fraud because it's not a hoax. It's the real deal.

So here's this guy, Lazarus, who was dead a few hours ago. And here he is walking around alive again. The evidence walking right before their noses, right before their very eyes.

So from that day on, they plotted to take Jesus' life. You see, they only had two options. Either they followed Jesus and became Christians, or they kill him.

Two options. Either they follow Jesus or they destroy the evidence. Now, it's not totally rational.

Let's kill the person who offers to give you life. And we see their twisted logic played out again in verse 10 of chapter 12, just across the page there.

[15 : 48] Large crowds gathered to see Lazarus raised from the grave. So verse 10, the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well. It's kind of warped thinking how to deal with the man raised from the dead problem.

Kill the dead man who was raised from the dead. A bit of a warped logic, kind of cutting off their noses to spite the face kind of thing. And I don't know, maybe this gives us a little bit of an insight.

Maybe this helps us understand why sometimes our friends irrationally reject the gospel. But it becomes clear that their motivation is political in verse 48.

If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. And the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation. So it's a kind of politically expedient motive.

Israel is occupied by the imperial Roman power. There's certain freedoms that they're allowed, but it is precarious. International relations there in the Middle East are fragile then and now.

[17 : 02] Well, along comes this Jesus who can raise the dead and crowds of people starting to follow him. And from their perspective, this is jeopardizing their delicate hold on power.

Might upset the Romans, this guy raising people from the dead. So we better get rid of him. So Jesus' ability to raise the dead is what finally gets Jesus killed.

The one who gives life must die in order to give life. Jesus' ability to give life is what gets him killed.

But also, and here's the total mind bender, Jesus getting killed is what gives him the ability to give life.

For Lazarus to live, Jesus must die. And the giving of life to Lazarus brings death to Jesus.

[18 : 05] So this leads us on to our next main section. And so they realize, the Pharisees, that Jesus is becoming too popular. And then this guy, Caiaphas, pipes up and unwittingly says something profounder than he realizes.

And I was reading about a guy at a restaurant, what do you call it, a fried chicken restaurant this past week. His total came to exactly \$13.

And the guy serving him seemed unsettled by that and said, I don't like that. And a customer quipped, unlucky chicken. The guy serving paused for a moment.

They're all unlucky in here, sir. Well, that's kind of pseudo profound at best. And the Bible nowhere condones superstition. But Caiaphas says something truly profound.

Says something much deeper, much more profound, much more significant than he could possibly realize. So reading in from verse 48. If we let Jesus go on performing miracles like this, everyone will believe in him.

[19 : 21] And then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation. Then one of them, named Caiaphas, spoke up. You know nothing at all. You know nothing at all.

You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.

So let's just take his words at face value. And it's just political reasoning. It's political expediency. It might be ruthless.

But hey, somebody's going to make the tough calls. That's his mentality. And there's a classic ethical dilemma. Philosophers have struggled with it. Known as the trolley problem.

By the way, if you're familiar with the TV series, The Good Place, which I'm not. But I understand in The Good Place, the trolley problem featured on that. It goes like this.

[20 : 18] You're a bystander at a switch that will swerve a trolley car, a tram from the track that it's on, where it's hurtling towards five victims who will surely die when it hits them.

But you have the power. You can switch the switch to a sidetrack with a single victim who will be killed instead. So what do you do?

Should you flip the switch or not? Take one life to save five. But if you flip the switch, what's the difference between that and throwing another bystander onto the rail track to derail the tram, bringing it to a halt?

So that's the trolley problem. We're not going to be solving it this morning. But for Caiaphas, it's a no-brainer. There's no moral qualms whatsoever. The greatest good for the most people, one man dies for the nation.

And this is political expediency at its most ruthless. So John wants us to see his words are more profound, though, than he realizes or could possibly have intended.

[21 : 33] And it gets right to the very heart of the gospel. So he might have been saying these words for selfish, self-serving reasons, but John tells us a prophecy from God.

And one commentator, Don Carson, puts it like this. When Caiaphas spoke, God was speaking, even if they weren't saying the same things. When Caiaphas spoke, God was speaking.

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.

So John really helps us here. He shows us that he's teaching us the gospel. John reinterprets Caiaphas' words in the context of Jesus' saving ministry, in context of Jesus bringing salvation, not just to the Jews, but to everyone who would place their trust in him.

Better that one man should die for the people. Now that little word for is really important here. It translates a Greek word, hyper, and it basically means on behalf of.

[23 : 04] So you could read it like this, verse 50. It is better that one man die, hyper, on behalf of the people. It's better that one man die on behalf of the people than the whole nation perish.

And then John explains it. He prophesied that Jesus would die, hyper, on behalf of the Jewish nation, and not only on behalf of that nation, but for everybody who believes in him.

So this word, hyper, it basically means there's a substitute or a swap. Somebody's gonna die, and it's better that Jesus dies as a substitute on our behalf in our place.

That's what theologians mean when they say Jesus, they talk about Jesus' death is substitutionary. Jesus' death would be instead of other people dying.

Jesus would die in our place. Jesus died in your place. Now this concept, this idea of Jesus dying on behalf of us is found all the way through John's gospel.

[24 : 22] I'm not gonna go through it all, but right at the beginning of the gospel, John the Baptist, seeing Jesus coming, declares, behold the Lamb of God, come to take away the sins of the world.

In chapter 10, so just flick back a page to chapter 10, verse 11. Chapter 10, verse 11. Jesus says, I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for, on behalf of, instead of, the sheep. The chicken might have been headed for the abattoir, but the sheep are gonna live, because the good shepherd is gonna die in their place.

And it's right away through John's gospel, culminating in Jesus' trial and crucifixion. The one who can give life will die.

The substitute, the substitution of his life for ours. My uncle Tim lives in Zimbabwe, and on the 20th of April, 2023, last year, he was involved in a major car accident, the car was totaled, having flown through the air, and landed on its roof, and then righted itself about 30 meters away from the roadside into the bush like that.

[25 : 40] My uncle suffered four breaks to his neck, but incredibly has made a full recovery since. He wrote at the time of his reflections on the grace of God.

Well, that was April last year. In August of the same year, Uncle Tim's stepdaughter, Lucy, was also involved in a major car accident.

A young woman with a strong Christian faith, her whole life ahead of her, involved in a terrible car crash in Zimbabwe. Well, over the next few days, many, many people prayed for her recovery, but brain tests on three separate occasions with three different specialists all confirmed the same, that her brain stem was dead, and they gradually reduced the feed into the life support system, and she died.

Well, Uncle Tim would later reflect that he only wished he could have swapped places with her, substituted his life for hers.

On the cross, that's exactly, that's exactly what Jesus has done for us. His life for ours.

[27 : 07] His life instead of us. And ultimately, it's on the cross that Jesus acts out this truth. Greater love has no one than this to lay down his life for, hyper his friends.

So Caiaphas' words take us right, right to the very heart of the gospel. One man must die on behalf of the people.

The only reason that Jesus can give life is because Jesus died. You see, life-giving is an amazing gift, but it comes at an extraordinary cost.

Jesus' life for ours. I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even though they die.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for showing us this Jesus who has authority over death itself, who called out from the tomb, called out to the man dead in there to come out into the light.

[28 : 40] Lord God, we thank you for Jesus' amazing promise, for his amazing proof of that promise in the raising of Lazarus.

We thank you for the eternal resurrection life on offer to those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus. Would you impress on us these great truths in our hearts?

Would you remind us day by day of the cost that was involved, the love that was demonstrated in the Jesus who took our place, in the Jesus who died on our behalf, and help us to live out our lives in grateful response to this.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.