

John 11:33-44

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[0 : 00] And we're looking at the question which is printed on your sheets which were on your chairs at the top there. What kind of God gives people hope in the face of death?

That's what we're going to be thinking about over the next few minutes. It is a really good question, isn't it? It's maybe a slightly deep and heavy question.

And as we think about the issue of death, I'm aware as well that it's a sensitive subject. And for many of you, I know that it's been a real struggle, that issue.

But if you'll allow me, I want to make this personal to you today for the next few minutes. I want to invite you to think about your own death.

What sort of God do you need to give you real hope? What sort of God reveals himself to us in the Bible? And can he give us hope as we think about death?

[1 : 04] I don't know how you think about your own death, if you think about it at all. Maybe you're more of an optimist. Maybe you'd say something like, well, death is just a doorway into another existence.

So it's neither good nor bad. You just sort of reincarnate into something else or somebody else. Or maybe you think about death as being just a bit of a non-event, really, in that we don't have a soul that lives on.

And everything about you, your physical body, your personality, everything that makes you you, just decomposes into a bunch of molecules.

So death really isn't anything to worry about. We live and then we die. That's it. The novelist Peter Schaeffer wrote more soberingly about his own death.

He said this, I'm going to die, and the thought of that dark has for years rotted everything for me. Maybe Schaeffer's a bit more of a pessimist, isn't he?

[2 : 16] But maybe that's more like you. You're really worried about death, about that issue. You're really worried about your own death, like Schaeffer. But the Bible speaks about death like a shadow.

It calls it the shadow of death. So think of the shadow on the centre court at Wimbledon, if you watch tennis. Imagine the final at Wimbledon.

And sometimes if the sun is shining, you see a little shadow, don't you, on the court. It starts off as a little crack of darkness. And it begins to move over the court.

No one really notices that happening, do they? But eventually, by the end of the match, both players and the whole of that green grass at centre court is covered under that shadow.

And Schaeffer admits, as he talks about death, that death, just like that shadow, is inevitable. But it's also horrific. It's a darkness, he said, that rots his life.

[3 : 24] Now, he may be a pessimist, but he admits, doesn't he, that there are actually very few places where we can find real comfort in the thought of death.

Schaeffer didn't have much hope in that quote, did he? And in reality, I think most people, deep down, agree with him, rather than the we live and die and nothing happens opinion.

Just think of all the effort that goes into avoiding death for as long as physically possible. We want to distance ourselves from death, don't we?

Because we know instinctively that it's wrong, it's horrific. So we want to be young, don't we?

Because youth buys us time.

We want to be healthy, because good health buys us time. We want good lifestyles, because we're told good lifestyles buy us time, don't we?

[4 : 25] But eventually, death is like that shadow and it comes upon every one of us. So the question we've got to ask ourselves, is the question that we're asking today, who can we turn to, to

get us through it?

Who can we trust with our own deaths? Where can we find real hope? Now it turns out that Jesus Christ has got a lot to say on the subject of death.

Jesus comes to us in the Bible and he says to you and me, you can trust me with your death. In fact, he goes on to say, you must trust me.

There is nobody else to trust with your death. So, if you'd like to take hold of the sheets that are on your seats there, you've got a section there from John's Gospel.

It's a book that we looked at last week, here on Tuesday. It's written by one of Jesus' closest followers and friends. And it's in the New Testament, John's Gospel.

[5 : 29] And you've got there a section printed from John chapter 11. John is an eyewitness to the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

And this is about halfway through his book. And as we look here, I want us to see three things as to why God, Jesus shows us a God that we can have hope in, in the face of death.

Firstly, Jesus shows us the kind of God who is indignant towards death. He's indignant towards death.

He's furious about death. Now, in this part of John's book, we see that Jesus arrives in the town of two friends. They're called Mary and Martha.

And it's the funeral of their brother. The sisters of the dead man, Lazarus, are there with the community. They're all there. Emotions are high. Jesus approaches the corpse.

[6 : 29] He approaches the graveside of his friend Lazarus. Have a look at number 35 there. Halfway down the page. We're told that as Jesus comes to the tomb, Jesus wept.

Jesus wept. Now, that's the shortest verse in the whole of the Bible. It's only two words. Jesus wept. Jesus wept. And it tells us, doesn't it, that with death, God is reduced to tears.

He feels the pain of death. He weeps about death. He feels the fear that we have of it as well.

But you know, his reaction is stronger than just tears, isn't it? Look a couple of sentences before that to 33. Just look there. When Jesus saw her weeping.

And the Jews who'd come with her also weeping. He was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. He was deeply moved in his spirit.

[7 : 38] He was greatly troubled. Now, that is not a kind of sentimental response that Jesus has. Actually, the words that John uses in the Greek language that he wrote his book in, mean more like that Jesus snorts with the fury of a war horse.

There. So, whilst he weeps with grief, as we do, he's absolutely furious with the situation.

Jesus is outraged at death. He sees the effects that death has in the world. The effects it has on families. He sees the weeping there.

And he is indignant. He's furious about death. Now, just think about how different Jesus' reaction is to the atheist reaction about death.

One famous atheist said, In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice.

[8 : 54] The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

But Jesus sees death. And he's furious. He's indignant with it. As God becomes a man, he's outraged at this intruder.

Death is not just being unlucky. It is wrong. He's indignant with it. You know, if you're at home, and you have the dreadful experience of having somebody break in through the kitchen window, it's not going to give you much hope, is it?

If the person that you live with is someone who politely, politely just lets them ravage through all your things, smashing stuff up in the kitchen, there is no hope, is there, in somebody who just says, well, these things happen, and just shrugs their shoulders and goes back to sleep.

No, I want to live with somebody who gets angry, who gets up, gets hold of the baseball bat and turfs them out. And so Jesus shows us a God who gives us hope because he's indignant towards death.

[10 : 16] He doesn't just shrug his shoulders. Well, we all go there in the end, don't we? Death is a natural part of life. Some people get unlucky. No! How dare you, he says.

Deeply moved and greatly troubled. He snorts like a furious horse. He's indignant towards death. And that's the sort of person we need, isn't it, with us, as we face death, isn't it? Someone who sees death for what it is, and gives it the reaction it should get. He's the kind of God who's indignant towards death. So he says, you can trust me with your death. So he's indignant towards death. But the second thing, Jesus shows us the kind of God who is defiant towards death. He's the kind of God who's defiant towards death. You know, we can be angry at death, can't we? And we are. We can be angry at death, we can be furious, just like Jesus, but it doesn't change anything. But Jesus, whilst he is angry, he can go much, much further than that.

[11 : 29] So he prays a prayer at the graveside at this funeral. Just imagine the scene. Zoom in at number 43, will you? And when he prayed this prayer, when he said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out!

Now I don't know if you've ever been at a funeral where the name of the deceased person has been called out during the ceremony. It's an awkward moment. It does happen. People get emotional, don't they, at funerals. They shout out all sorts of things. Funerals tend to be places where inhibitions get lost. People call out the name of the dead person. They're so angry and distressed by death. So is Jesus just reacting like that? Is it just a reaction of distress? Well, we get to one of the most shocking verses in the Bible, don't we? Number 44. The man who had died came out. The man who died came out.

[12 : 33] John is claiming here that as Jesus shouts out, Lazarus, come out, it is not a hopeless cry. It is not just a hopeless call.

It is a powerful command. It's a powerful command. I'm not saying it's easy to believe. It's not easy to believe, is it? Dead men don't just get up and walk if you talk to them. You cannot speak to a corpse and expect a response. But when Jesus shouts, it's not a hopeless cry. It's a powerful command. You know, the New Testament, it speaks about Christians who have died. And it uses a strange phrase. It calls them those who have fallen asleep. It's lovely. Some of them die, though, in terrible circumstances, under immense persecution. So why does it call them people who've fallen asleep?

[13 : 33] Well, it does that because Jesus' voice is so powerful with death that as he calls his people from death, it's as if he's calling them from a snout, from a sleep.

It's a powerful command. Come out, Lazarus. Come out, Chris. Come out, Ralph. Morning. And if that is true, this man Jesus shows us a God who you can trust with your death. His words cross over that barrier between life and death, between the living and the death. He's indignant towards death. He's furious about it, but he's got the power to do something. He says, you can trust me with your death. It's not a hopeless cry. It's a powerful command. You want to trust somebody, don't you? But can we trust in somebody who just cries about death, although that is comforting? We can trust somebody who commands death, though. Who says, wake up.

[14 : 43] He commands death. He's indignant. He's defiant. But then thirdly, in the last scene, Jesus shows us the kind of God who is dominant over death.

He's dominant over death. Now, has Mary just witnessed that sort of trick? Is it a kind of David Blaine style illusion with some mirrors and smoke? Well, actually, we read about Mary being at another graveside in the book of John. Later in chapter 20, it's printed there at the bottom of those sheets. It's the grave of Jesus. Three days after he's been publicly executed. And it's a very similar scene in many ways. So look at verse 11. Mary is weeping outside the tomb. Some folk just get all the bad news, don't they? Here is another one she loves, taken by death.

[15 : 47] She turns around to see a man she doesn't recognise and with one word she sees who it is. It's Jesus. Look at number 16. One word Jesus said to her, Mary.

And Jesus' defiance towards death is seen most wonderfully as he himself goes to physical death on the cross. He rots in a tomb for three days and he rises again.

He himself dominates over death. Jesus shows us the kind of God who actually experiences the very thing that we're most afraid of and he wins.

Now if you can stretch your minds for a moment, just imagine in a bizarre chain of events that we had to stop this talk for a moment, we had to pause this lunchtime because a wolf somehow had got loose in the town hall.

Imagine it. So we've got to lock the doors, we've got to stay in here and wait for a rescue. But in a display of bravery, Paul says, no, I'm not waiting here any longer, I need my lunch, I'm going outside and I'm going to get rid of the wolf.

[16:59] I'm going to kill the wolf. So it's Paul versus the wolf. Now the only way that we can know who has won is if we see either of them again, isn't it?

And we know that Paul has won when he comes back and he knocks back on that door there on the other side of the window. We can now know that we can trust Paul to kill the wolf.

It's a silly story but I think you get the point. That's the wonder of Easter though, isn't it? As someone once said, it isn't that Jesus is alive but that Jesus has risen.

He's back. He's back from the dead. He's killed the wolf. As John Stott said, we live and then we die but Jesus Christ died and then he lived.

He's back. His resurrection says, you can trust me with your death. In the 1970s, dozens of high-ranking officials from the Nixon administration were shamed by what's now known as the Watergate scandal if you know about that.

[18:12] It's come to symbolise that investigation that took place where allegations were made towards the government of the time of phone hacking and all sorts of government cover-ups and it led to Nixon's eventual resignation in 1974.

Charles Colson had the job of being his special counsel for public liaison. He was there throughout the whole thing and he was a Christian and he said this, I know the resurrection is a fact and Watergate proved it to me.

How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, the apostles. then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years never once denying it.

Everyone was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world and they couldn't keep alive for three weeks.

You're telling me 12 apostles could keep alive for 40 years? Absolutely impossible, Charles Carlson. The resurrection of Jesus is an unusual thing, isn't it?

[19:36] As we come up to Easter and we think about it, putting it mildly, it's unprecedented. And men will often die for things that they believe in, won't they?

There's nothing unusual about that. But to knowingly die for something they knew to be a lie is much more unusual, isn't it? So how do you respond to the Easter message this Easter?

How do you respond? As one person put it, if Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said. If he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said?

The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching, but whether or not he rose from the dead. So who can you trust with your death?

Christopher Hitchens, the famous atheist, said, I don't trust false consolations of religion, I trust in medical science and the support of friends and family. That's who he trusted with his death.

[20:42] Now those things are really good things, aren't they? But you know, I'm not convinced that they are enough. When we face our own death, there is only so far that those good things of medical science, friends and family can help us.

There will be a moment where what they do for us just isn't enough. But Jesus shows us a God who's indignant towards death. He's furious about death.

His reaction is right and proper and he's defiant against it. He gives not a hopeless cry but a powerful command. And he's dominant over death.

He's killed the wolf. He says to you and me, you can trust me with your death. We live and then die. Jesus Christ died and then lived.

Let's pray. Let's