

Death Stinks

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Date: 02 September 2001

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 2nd of September 2001. The preacher is Andrew Prideaux.

His sermon is entitled Death Stinks and is based on John chapter 11 verses 1 to 44.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. Please help us to listen carefully tonight to what you have to say to us to keep listening. Please change us.

Please teach us more about what it means to trust in your Son for life. And we pray these things in his name. Amen. Well, how do you view death?

Maybe you don't think about it at all. That's what happens to old people or somebody else. Maybe you think about it all the time. Maybe it frightens you.

[1 : 0 4] Or maybe you're a wishful thinker. When it comes to death, it's just the next phase of life. It's okay. Let me tell you about two views of death that I overheard recently.

The first one that I heard was on the night of the great Bob Dylan ticket camp out. I was camping out for tickets for Bob Dylan. Some of you may know that I'm a bit of a fan of Bob. And, yeah, we went out at about four in the morning to get the good tickets.

Out to Greensboro, there's a newsagent there that opens quite early, so it's a good place to get tickets, just in case you're wanting to know in the future. And we were camping out there. And I don't know why, but the topic of all the conversations surrounding us, my friend and I, was death.

It was a bit depressing, actually. So I overheard the Italian cafe owner, who was there from about 5am, getting ready for a day of business. And he was talking about some well-known celebrity.

I didn't catch the name, but he was saying, well, we're all dying. Sorry, the celebrity had a terminal illness, and they were talking about this and how terrible it was. But he said, well, we're all dying at different rates, but we're all dying.

[2 : 1 3] In fact, he said, as soon as we're born, we're dying. Born to die. Some of the guys I was camping out with, and these are their real names, Armadillo, Slim and Long John, that's what they tell me anyway, they are long-term Dylan devotees.

They saw him when he came out in 1966, before I was born, and they can tell you every time that Dylan has blown his nose in the last 10 years, things like that. But they never tire of the music.

See, music is life for them. They'll go to see Bob yet again, hoping to catch one more significant moment that reminds them that they're alive, that reminds them that life can be significant, a profound moment, something like that.

But as we sat around and had coffee later with the tickets in our hot little hands, it was a sad sight to this whole situation. You see, we were talking about the great ones in music, many of whom had died.

People that they were fans of, I guess. These guys were in their 50s, and they were thinking out loud about people they used to listen to when they were teenagers. And it was, well, one day the lights go out.

- [3 : 28] One day the music stops. That's one view. One view of death. The other view of death I heard recently was watching religious television on Sunday morning.
- Don't ask me why, but I was watching it. And there was a woman being interviewed who described her job as helping people prepare for death. She was actually a palliative care counsellor.
- And the interviewer asked her, she thought she must be an expert on this thing. Well, how do you view death? How do you view death? She said, well, death to me is a friend.
- It's the next phase in life. It's like going home. It sounded very nice. It sounded very comforting. But it also sounded very vague.
- You see, in the whole half-hour program, she couldn't tell us why she thought that. She didn't tell us. She didn't tell us why it wasn't actually something to be feared, perhaps, rather than welcomed.
- [4 : 29] What about you? Can I ask you again? How do you view death? Well, in our passage tonight, which is on your sheet there, please have it in front of you as I speak.
- We have a very common story, but it's no less tragic. Well, common in some ways, uncommon in others. It starts as a common story, but it's no less tragic before that.
- Death invades. It interrupts. It gets between a family. Martha and Mary's brother, Lazarus, is very ill, and eventually he dies.
- This family are close friends of Jesus, as we find out at the beginning of the passage. And they obviously know about his power. And they've sent for him to come to Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, where they are, while Lazarus is still alive, that Jesus might heal him.
- They've seen him heal before. They know he can do it. But Jesus does something that, at first glance, seems very odd. He delays his journey by two days.
- [5 : 35] That's what it says there in verse 6. Now, this is something that any doctor or any minister will tell you, that if you get a phone call saying someone's dying, you take that phone call straight away.
- You don't let the answering machine get that one. This is a mobile call that you get onto. What, then, is Jesus doing? I think Martha's thinking along these lines when, this is actually after Lazarus has died, and she goes out to meet Jesus on the road to Bethany.
- Have a listen of verses 21 and 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.
- Interesting response, isn't it? It's a mixed response. It shows disappointment if you'd been here, but also faith. He wouldn't have died. You could have done something.
- But even now that Lazarus is dead, there is still hope. In Martha's words, even now God will give you whatever you ask. And yet, her brother is dead.
- [6 : 44] Now, we as readers, of course, have been led into Jesus' plans. Martha will only discover these later. But we know from that first column on the CD that Jesus' desire to come to Lazarus is part of something bigger than just helping this family that he loved, this friend that he loved.
- Jesus has a goal in waiting. Have a look at verse 4. When he heard this, Jesus said, This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory, so that God's Son may be glorified through it.
- Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. If you read John's Gospel up to this point, you see that, and right through, Jesus is constantly on about doing the Father's will.

And the Father's will here is that even this tragedy, the death of a friend, might result in God's glory being revealed. And how is God's glory revealed?

Well, from chapter 1 of John, we know that his glory is revealed when his Son, when the Lord Jesus, is glorified. That is, when Jesus is shown to be who he is.

[8 : 02] The one authorised by the Father to bring life to a dead world. In John's Gospel, the Father is on about glorifying the Son, and the Son is on about glorifying the Father.

But did you notice verses 5 and 6 said, Jesus loved these guys. He loved them. Jesus didn't wait a couple of days with some mercenary attitude that they don't matter, that the death of a friend in itself is unimportant.

No, his waiting is also motivated by love. As he says later, explaining his delay to the disciples. Have a look at verse 14.

He told them plainly, Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him. It's for their benefit that he waits.

Their benefit. So that they can see his glory and believe in him. I was reminded recently, Ness and I were reminded recently, I guess a couple of months ago now, that a parent is not always loving because they give their child whatever they ask for straight away.

[9 : 22] And we were reminded of this when we had to go to the immunisation session in the sort of the town hall equivalent in Glen Waverley, and poor old Lucy had no idea what was going on.

We walk into this room with lots of screaming babies. They had to pull her pants off because something was going to happen to her leg. We kept going up in this queue and going behind this curtain and the babies going into the curtain looked alright, but they always came out crying.

You go behind this curtain and this guy walks up, I think he had a white coat on, with a nice, shiny, interesting looking bit of metal in his hand. And then suddenly, jabs it into her leg.

I mean, this must seem like random infliction of pain to our daughter who's, I don't know, six months old or something like that. But actually, it wasn't, was it?

She didn't know it at the time, but it was actually saving her potentially from illnesses that could have killed her. So it is with Jesus here.

[10 : 27] By waiting, Lazarus dies. There is initial sorrow. But he has something far better for them than they could ever design for him.

Because Jesus is on about, not about people's will, but the will of the Father. Going back to Jerusalem in itself is a dangerous thing for Jesus to do.

As his disciples point out in verses 8 and 16 on the sheet there, it's really starting to heat up in Jerusalem. Last time he was there, the Jews tried to stone him to death.

But Jesus goes there knowing that it will ultimately result in his death because this is how God will be glorified through him. This is how he will be glorified.

This is how his people will receive life. This seventh sign of Jesus in John's Gospel, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, will point to Christ and to the even greater things that he will do in Jerusalem.

[11 : 29] It's hard to trust in Jesus when tough things happen, isn't it? It's hard to do that. Think of Martha. This is her dear brother, no longer with her. And I think it's hard because we consider our lives so often just from our plans and our dreams.

Let's face it, when you're working out your five-year plan, I don't know if you've ever sat down and tried to do one of those, you don't factor in getting sick and dying, do you? It generally doesn't feature prominently in the good old five-year plan.

No. These things are an interruption to our plans. These are the things that stop our lives working. But the amazing thing about this story is that if we're on about God's plan, God's glory, even death, is caught up into his plan to bring glory to his name and blessing to his people.

We'll come back to that a little later on in the passage. But let's come back now to Jesus' conversation with Martha in the second column on your sheet there. I'll read from verse 21. 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. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

[12 : 51] Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this? Martha trusts in Jesus at this point, at least at some level, doesn't she? She sees the extraordinarily unique relationship that he shares with the Father.

Verse 22 there, I know that God will give you whatever you ask. She's seen him heal the blind before. She knows about the feeding of the 5,000.

She wouldn't have called for him if she didn't think that he was powerful, that he could do something. And yet, her words here to Jesus have the whiff of the official line about them.

You know what I'm talking about. You're in a discussion about God with one of your friends. And they ask you, Well, do you believe that God is in control, that God is sovereign, that God is in charge?

[13 : 52] And you say, Well, yes, of course. The Bible teaches us that God is all-powerful and that he cares for us by definition. God must be in control. But then you get sick.

You're not able to go to work or get your study done that you're meant to do. You may even be out of work for a while. You may fail your subject.

You may fail the year. It's not your fault. You got sick. What about now? Do you believe that God is in control? Jesus is really testing Martha's faith here.

He tells her straight out, verse 23, Your brother will rise again. Yes, of course, Jesus, in the resurrection, on the last day. Everybody will.

She's a good Jew. She knows the scriptures. She's got the orthodoxy down pat. But she doesn't even think that Jesus might mean that Lazarus will rise now, today.

[14 : 56] But Jesus is persistent here. He wants to know not whether she's got the orthodoxy, the right teaching, but whether she's got him. Whether she's got him.

Verse 25, Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

Do you believe this? Do you believe this? I am the resurrection and the life. See what Jesus is doing here?

He's steering Martha away from some vague hope of what God might do in the future. He's shifting her focus from wishful thinking and maybes to definites.

And where can those definites be found? In Christ. See, Jesus' words here, like the miracle, the sign will do in a moment, are actually pointing Martha straight back to himself.

[15 : 59] to the one who is the resurrection and the life. The only one who can provide certainty in the face of the reality of death.

I reckon people like to stay vague when it comes to matters that involve their ultimate destiny. We're very sharp on the things that are happening in the immediate future. We're very sharp on when a traffic light is red, you stop.

I hope we are anyway. And when it's green, you go. We're very sharp on that. But anything beyond the superannuation plan, basically, ultimate destiny, we don't think about that.

It's a bit like that program I was talking about at the start, the counsellor on that show. All of the hope for the future after death that she was offering to people who were dying.

And I have to say, it did sound like wishful thinking. It did sound like wistful longings and maybes. It's like trying to care for somebody who struggles to face each day, who hates themselves by giving them some sort of hallucinogenic drug and saying, well, here you go, escape for a while and everything will be alright when you wake up in a couple of days.

[17 : 18] But the reality would be there just as hard to face you. It's what Jesus is saying here. You can't just vaguely hope into the future.

This is a question that Martha, that we need to answer today. We are confronted here with the only hope for life and for the future in Christ. Look at what Jesus says with the authority of God himself.

one of these great I am statements from John's Gospel. That's how the Lord revealed himself in the Old Testament, the great I am. And Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life.

You want to live now to God instead of continuing in spiritual death? Do you want to go on living into eternity with God as friend and not as your enemy on judgment day?

Well then, says Jesus, you need me. He who believes in me will live even though he dies. Yes, the consequences of sin in the world will still be experienced by everyone in the sense that we will all die physically.

[18 : 25] But even through this in Christ we will live. Physical death will come but this need not be the end of the story. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.

There's a real way. In which as soon as we put our trust in Christ we are brought out of death to life. A life that never ends.

Physical death will be like a blip on the screen relatively speaking. And if you're in Christ you will live to God forever. This shows us that the life Jesus is talking about here in fact right through this gospel eternal life is more than just unending existence.

it is a quality of life. It's about knowing God's forgiveness and love and the blessings that flow from that now and in an ever increasing way for eternity rather than eternal punishment and separation from this love and this life.

And the crucial question question comes comes at the end of this description. Do you believe in this? You can't put this off.

[19 : 39] You can't hope that it will be right on the night. That it will all come out in the wash. You can't just take a pill or hear some nice words before you go to bed and hope that it will be alright in the morning. Life is available solely in the sun.

He controls life and death. He is the resurrection and the life. Jesus says do you believe this? Well what does Martha say?

Verse 27 Yes Lord she told him I believe that you are the Christ the Son of God who is to come into the world. We're getting the orthodoxy again and it's true it is true she knows that Jesus is the Messiah the Christ the Son of God by definition she knows from the scriptures that this one would bring about life where there is death.

We heard from Isaiah earlier Andrew read it out to us that's a prophecy that that's what the Messiah and the servant figure the same person in Isaiah is going to bring but what about now?

What about her brother? Does she believe that Jesus can give him life? What about Mary the other sister?

[20 : 55] She's with the rest of the mourners at home probably looking after them entertaining them actually but when Jesus is near Martha lets her know so that Mary can get away and meet with Jesus but as often happens in the gospels Jesus isn't left alone for long the other mourners follow and look on and in verse 32 we see that her reaction is the same as that of her sister at first if you'd been here Lazarus would have lived but then we read something quite amazing quite striking verse 33 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 then the Jews said see how he loved him but some of them said could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying the weeping that

Jesus witnesses in Mary and the other Jews with her is not sneaking a few tears in a hanky this is good old fashioned Middle Eastern wailing that's the strength of the verb there well how does Jesus react here I think the words are actually stronger than being deeply moved and the words have to do with groaning with indignation even anger in spirit just means within himself and the same words are used or same verbs used again at the beginning in verse 38 the question is what is Jesus indignant even angry about even to the point of tears well it certainly is the death of his friend Lazarus was his friend who has died but I think it's more than that death I think it's actually the reality of death itself you see this was not the way it was meant to be sin and death have invaded

God's good creation and Jesus is confronting that head to head here God is on about life not death Jesus is weeping at this whole situation of a world gone wrong a world which is chosen in its choice against God has chosen death instead of life and this is highlighted in the actual physical death of his friend Lazarus but more than that perhaps too he is angry at their reaction the word for when Jesus weeps is different to theirs it's obviously it's right for them to mourn but remember who they are in the presence of it's clear here that those who are standing at this tomb are in despair because they don't think that Jesus is in control no they think that darkness and death are in control their tears their mourning speaks of despair after all

Jesus has shown them they still don't recognize who stands among them Jesus weeps at this point just as he will weep over Jerusalem that city that did not recognize that her salvation was in her midst the reaction of the people to Jesus weeping is interesting as well have a look in 36 there the Jews said see how he loved him but some of them said could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying their words are true at one level yes Jesus loved Lazarus yes Jesus could have healed Lazarus if he was there sooner but do they recognize the most important thing that Jesus is the Lord of life and death some of them said could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying in other words why why didn't

Jesus act in the way we think he should have acted a while ago now when I was doing some youth work at a church one of the guys in the group died of cancer he was only 14 years old and it was obviously a very tough time for the family and for his friends at school and at church and while his parents were obviously sad they were Christians and they knew their son was a Christian and I remember at the funeral there was a great sense of hope their son was confident that Jesus would look after him when he died because he knew he was going to die and they were confident too but one of his friends who had grown up with him at church didn't respond in that way she was really angry at God because you see God had taken away her friend from her and to this day a number of years later this is the reason why she doesn't want to have anything to do with

[26 : 11] Christianity what was the difference between his parents and his friend their loss was the same you might even say in some ways that the loss of the parents was greater they lost a son I think the difference was and still is that his parents recognised that Jesus was Lord even of life and death that although they found it hard to take ultimately they could trust that Jesus did what was best for their son but his friend couldn't sadly for her death could only ever be an interruption a hopeless thing because she didn't acknowledge Jesus as Lord and so she didn't trust in him story's not over for her yet we'll keep praying for her and as we read on we see the story's not over for Lazarus's sisters either have a look in verse 38

Jesus once more deeply moved came to the tomb it was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance take away the stone he said but Lord said Martha the sister of the dead man by this time there is a bad odour for he has been there four days well Martha's faith is really being tested now like it's never been tested before she said back in verse 27 that she believes that Jesus is the Christ but what Jesus asks her to do here well that's another matter he's been dead for four days notice the text there calls her the sister of the dead man sort of reminding us that he really is dead it also shows us that biological science hasn't come all that far since 33 AD somebody's been dead for four days it's best to leave the door of the cave shut let's be honest he's not in a fridge he's not in the morgue he's sealed up in a dank stone tomb and this is the understatement of the millennium I think by this time there is a bad odour well Jesus is not going to let her get away with this he's going to show her that he is the Lord he keeps pushing verse 40 he said did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God so they took away the stone then Jesus looked up and said father I thank you that you have heard me I knew that you always hear me but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here that they may believe that you sent me this is an invitation for

Martha for all of those people standing there to see the glory of God revealed to see Jesus for who he really is the one sent from the father who does nothing apart from the father remember this is the whole goal of this miracle this sign it's pointing to Jesus to the glory of God that is revealed in him so that they will believe in him so that they will entrust their lives to him even in the face of death well we know what happens don't we when he had said this when he prayed Jesus called out in a loud voice Lazarus come out the dead man came out his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face Jesus said to them take off the grave clothes and let him go I think it's a bit sad how ho-hum this story has become for us maybe it isn't for you I apologise if it isn't ho-hum but if you've grown up going to Sunday school how many times have you heard this story probably 50 million something like that but think about it death is pretty final isn't it death is pretty final I remember our family getting the call it was in the middle of the night in

August of my year 12 year my grandfather had died we raced up to his house in Calista up in the hills not that we could do anything for him now and I remember seeing him lying there on the lounge room floor so still so final Lazarus had been dead for four days but with three words that echo the creative power of God's words in creation let there be life Jesus raises him from death to life Lazarus come out and he walks out of the tomb and in chapter 12 Jesus is at their house having a dinner party with them that Mary and Martha have thrown as a thank you for raising their brother from the dead it's amazing they're having a dinner party with the man who'd been dead for four days look at

Lazarus look at Jesus which this miracle this signpost points us to Jesus who will continue on in Jerusalem and eventually die on the cross there to take away the sting of death as we've been singing about sin and himself be raised from the dead to bring us the fruit of his death eternal life in a way this shout of Jesus which brings Lazarus back to life is only a pale anticipation of the shout that Jesus will give on the last day that will raise Lazarus that will raise my grandfather that will raise my young friend together with all who trust in Christ to share in the resurrection life of Christ and in the love of God forever we think we're pretty clever in the West in the 21st century but no matter how clever we get at putting off death in our society which is what most of medical science is on about putting off death there is ultimately no escaping it is there I occasionally talk to older people and this is a challenge when I think about how depressed and easily down I get when I get sick myself but I occasionally talk to older people who have become obsessed with their illnesses and their doctors are like gods to them because they can provide them with pills that will keep them going just that little bit longer just a little bit longer on the lawn bowls course just a little bit longer but it's a fool's paradise isn't it nobody is qualified to be our God to give us life except for the one who came saying verse 25 I am the resurrection and the life he who believes in me will live even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die do you believe this do you believe this behold we know not anything I can but trust that good shall fall at last far off at last to all and every winter change to spring so runs my dream but what am I an infant crying in the night an infant crying for the light and with no language but a cry in the end without

[33 : 54] Christ in the face of death and judgment that poem that verse is is the only song we have left to sing isn't it but through Christ we have another song to sing and I pray that it is ours and others like it Jesus lives no longer now can your terrors death appall us Jesus lives by this we know you are grave cannot hold us Jesus lives our hearts know well nothing from us his love shall sever life nor death nor powers of hell shall tear us from his keeping ever hallelujah amen let's pray Lord Jesus it's hard to trust you when things don't go according to plan it's hard to trust you in the face of death and we acknowledge tonight that it is something that scares us but we thank you tonight that we can have hope in the face of death because you have been raised from the tomb because you are the firstborn of many brothers and sisters we thank you that the sting of death sin has been dealt with in the cross and that we can remember that tonight as we share in communion together and we thank you that through the power of your resurrection we know that we need not fear death ultimately we know that your love will hold us to yourself forever please help us to remember that please help us to live in the light of that and we ask this for Jesus sake amen