

John 11:25 Jesus said ... "I am the resurrection and the life."

¹ Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

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." ⁵ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶ Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." ¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

²⁸ And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

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. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

³⁵ Jesus wept.

³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “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.”

⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² 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.”

⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

⁴⁴ 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.”

John 11:1-44 (NIV)

A rather odd incident!

Why did Jesus mourn over the death of godly Lazarus if he has gone to heaven? Why call him back to earth only for him to die again? If it was not yet time for Lazarus to die, why did Jesus not prevent him dying in the first place (see v. 37)? Why did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead when perhaps many others even more dear to Jesus (such as Joseph who had acted as his father) he had left in their tombs? Furthermore, if Jesus had been planning on raising Lazarus, why did he delay in going to Bethany?

The raising of Lazarus is a sign. In the context of Jesus' impending death (see particularly verses 7-8, 50 & 53) the raising of Lazarus is a sign of a greater resurrection soon to take place (see particularly 38-39 and the suggestive reference to the rolling away of the stone).

To understand this passage ...

We need to recover a Biblical understanding of death

Evangelical Christians often have unbiblical (Gnostic) views of death – as the release of the spirit from the limitations and imperfections of the body and its happy return to God.

Let me be clear: For the Christian, to die *is* to be absent from the body and be present with the Lord – which is better by far (see Philippians 1:23). But that does not diminish the fact that death is an awful tragedy. It was not part of God's plan for his world. When the body returns to the dust from which it is made this amounts to an undoing of God's work in creation. It marks a victory for Satan. Death remains an enemy which must be defeated. The Christian does not look for, and hope for, death but for life.

Jesus weeps at the tomb of Lazarus in the face of this awful reality – of one made in the image of God, a person once so full of life, now returning to the dust. Jesus weeps at the awful destruction of so many precious relationships – the broken relationships with his sisters and friends and their brokenness at his departing. This is what God's world has come to, and it moves Jesus to tears.

We need to regain a Biblical view of death.

We need to recover a Biblical hope concerning eternal life

If you were to ask Christians concerning their hope of eternal life, I suspect most would answer, "I hope to be with Jesus in heaven when I die." Now again, this is not entirely wrong but it is woefully short of the Biblical hope.

Look at John 11:23-24. Martha knows that there is hope for her brother. At the last day he will rise again (bodily) to live for ever. Martha knows that a day is coming when God will put

the world to rights through the Messiah. In that day death and suffering, hunger and pain will be no more. She knows that Lazarus will share in that day.

And this is the context for Jesus' words in v.25. He does not say, "Don't worry Martha, Lazarus is already with God in heaven." Rather, he says, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus is saying that he himself is the source of resurrection life, and to prove it he now anticipates that last day by calling Lazarus out of his tomb. This is a sign of what will happen at the last day when the returning Lord Jesus will call *all* his people from their tombs to enter into the fullness of resurrection life with their Lord.

Biblical hope concerning eternal life is hope for resurrection life.

We need to recover a Biblical understanding of the Gospel

What is the Gospel? Many Evangelical Christians might respond with something like this:

We are all sinners, separated from God because of our sin. Jesus came into the world to pay the penalty for our sins through his death on the cross. Because he died for us, our sins can be forgiven and, we can be reconciled with God, and we can go to live with him in heaven when we die.

This is *not* the Gospel that we find in the Bible, and when we preach this as the Gospel we do disservice to God's word and to the cause of the kingdom. Consider for a moment how such a presentation of the 'gospel':

- Leaves out the larger part of the Bible, skipping from Genesis 3 straight to Romans 3. What is all that stuff in between all about?
- It has nothing to say about the church – why bother with church if this is the gospel?
- Most importantly and fundamentally, it has no place for resurrection. Why does Paul argue that if Christ did not rise bodily from the dead our faith is make-believe if our faith is all about our spirits returning to God at death? Wouldn't it be enough for Jesus to have returned to God that way? What's resurrection got to do with it?

What then is the Gospel all about?

- It's about God's world gone wrong. This is God's world; a world he created to reflect his own glory. But it is a world that has rebelled against God and gone terribly wrong. Every aspect of life is affected: our relationship with God; relationship with self; relationships one with another; and by no means least, our relationship with the rest of creation.
- But God has not given up on his world. He plans not to write it off but to restore it.
- Jesus came into this damaged world to live a fully human life, showing us again what it is like for humankind to image God.
- Jesus died in our place, taking upon himself the judgment that our rebellion deserved and suffering the full effects of the brokenness of God's world.
- Jesus rose again from the dead, the firstfruits of the new creation.
- One day he will return to renew all things: we shall have resurrection bodies like his glorious body; creation itself will be renewed (Romans 8:19-23). It is *then* that sin and death will be no more – it is *then* that death, the last enemy will be defeated (read carefully and in context 1 Corinthians 15:54).
- In the meantime, by his Spirit, the risen Jesus is bringing into being a people in whom that new creation can already be seen, a people who live now something of the life of the age to come, who are a visual aid for the coming kingdom (see Ephesians 1:18-23; 3:10, 20-21) and who preach the good news of the kingdom.

We need to recover a Biblical understanding of the Gospel.

What difference does it make?

What difference does this make? Isn't it all just so much 'theology'?

We live in a world that lacks hope concerning the future. The Christian has a message of hope for the world, a sure and certain hope grounded in the resurrection of Christ (1 Peter 1:3-5). That hope does *not* consist in exchanging the earthly for the heavenly but in the resurrection of the body and the transformation of creation. This is what will happen at the last day. Christ's resurrection from the dead guarantees it.

For the Christian, future hope must shape present action. Look at the argument of 1 John 3:2-3. We shall be made perfectly like Jesus when he appears. Someone might ask, "Then why bother with holiness now, since we shall be made perfectly holy then?" But God's word and his Spirit within us won't allow us that lazy option, they call us to pursue now what shall be revealed then in all its perfection.

So also with the hope of resurrection: The picture of a world made new is to shape our present action: we seek now for a world which more fully reflects God's purpose as its Creator and Redeemer.

- We want to see the reality of the new creation in sinners being brought from death to life in Christ;
- We want to see the life of the new creation more visibly expressed in the life of the people of God: the church as God's new society; a reconciled and reconciling people; a forgiven and forgiving people; a people living a life of love, reflecting the love God has shown us in Jesus Christ – kingdom people.
- We want to see signs of the new creation breaking into our fallen world, for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We want people to experience life in all its fullness: freedom from addiction; healing for the sick; food for the hungry and water for the thirsty; help and hope for the poor, the widow, the orphan; education, training and useful employment; healing for a ravaged planet; mending of broken relationships in families, communities and nations ... and much, much more (see Luke 4:14-21).

What difference does the resurrection of Jesus from the dead make to the way you live in this world?

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church, and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21).

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