

Facing death

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like to read first of all some verses in the 11th chapter of John's Gospel. Verses which will focus our minds, I think, helpfully on this solemn but very important subject which we'll be addressing together this afternoon facing death.

John 11 from the 17th verse. Jesus has heard that Lazarus has died. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him but marked that Mary stayed at home.

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. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

[1 : 2 0] 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? Yes, Lord, she told him.

I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. 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.

When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.

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.

[2 : 2 8] Come and see, Lord, they replied. Jesus went. 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?

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. There was a cave with a stone rolled 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. Then Jesus 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. When he had said this, Jesus called out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

[3 : 31] The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped in strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, take off the grave clothes, and let him go.

During the eight and a half years that I've been parish minister in New Mills, a small village in Northern Ayrshire, to me, which is the centre of the universe, I think I've conducted about 350 funerals.

This past week, I had three funerals. I've got one on Monday, and one on Tuesday. And I suppose that death is therefore a reality that I'm consciously in the midst of.

Never a week goes by without there being some awareness that someone I know in the town, that I know almost all the people, whether they come to church or not, that some family is facing the reality of death.

And that's something that I find very, very humbling. And I'm certainly very glad to be able to spend a few moments this afternoon reflecting with you on this very important subject.

[4 : 49] Let me begin by reading to you a quotation that struck me quite forcibly this past week. It has often been remarked that death has replaced sex as the unmentionable subject.

Lacking any confidence in life to come, modern man finds the fact of natural death and dissolution too horrible to contemplate and turns away.

We live in a supposedly sophisticated society. We live supposedly in a society where people have developed their educational attainment to great degrees.

And yet we live in a society where people shy off from and turn their back upon and hide from the fact and the reality of death.

Modern man cannot cope with honestly facing up to the reality and certainty of death. Because death is the one undeniable, inescapable certainty in life that faces us all.

[6 : 01] For it is appointed unto men once to die. And all of us here, we're all of us so different. Different backgrounds, different temperaments.

But all of us have one thing in common. We have an appointment with destiny that we cannot break. God has decreed not only the beginning of our days but the end of our lives as well.

And it would be well for us if we were honest enough and courageous enough to consider that ultimate reality that awaits each one of us.

For none of us knows when that day and that hour may come for us. Remember the words of Jesus in the parable in Luke chapter 12 concerning the rich man who made great plans for his life.

And the words of God were simply Thou fool. Thou fool. No doubt to the world he was being a prudent man making great investments preparing well for his future but to God he was a fool a grady king sized fool because he was failing to take note and to consider and to prepare for that ultimate reality in his life which would come to him that very night and he would be utterly unprepared to meet it.

[7 : 27] death is the one inescapable reality that inheres into the very fabric of our fallen humanity because death you see is not only a physical reality it's also a spiritual necessity.

It's not simply that we are mortal but that we are fallen because death is the wages of sin. It is part of that whole phenomenal way in which God brings upon us the judgment that our sins deserve and it's that reality that we need to awaken ourselves to not the mere fact that life has a terminus but that death is a judgment of God upon our fallenness.

it is really God with whom we have to do for it is death which ushers us into the immediate presence of our maker.

I want to look at this subject with you from two perspectives you won't be surprised to hear I'm sure. First of all to look with you at facing death as a Christian and there are six points I want to make and secondly looking at death as a non-Christian and to see how vastly these things differ it is one thing to be a Christian and to face life's ultimate reality and it is altogether something else to face that ultimate reality outside of Christ without hope and without God in the world.

First of all then facing death as a Christian and the first thing we need to grasp and I say this simply by way of introduction is this death is not a reality that Christians stoically accept.

[9 : 23] This encounter of our Lord Jesus with the death of Lazarus is something that we greatly need to take to heart for you'll notice that when Jesus sees Mary weeping and the Jews also who had come with her weeping he was deeply moved in spirit and we're told Jesus wept but these English translations don't really bring out the force of the emotional impact that Lazarus' death had upon our Lord Jesus.

If we were to read the Greek more accurately it would read Jesus was deeply agitated and angered in his spirit Jesus wept and again in verse 38 Jesus once more deeply indignant agitated and angry you see when Jesus came across the reality of death he once again came face to face with the great reality that underpins death that is the fact of sin as the root of all suffering and pain and when our Lord came as it were to the grave of Lazarus there was this mixed emotion within him he was full of blazing anger as he saw once again what sin had done to a child of God but the word also has another side to it it's the word of sympathy it's a word that has a double edged meaning not only was he indignant and angry but he was full of deepest compassion and so we're told he wept and I think some Christians need to take these words to heart because we can too easily shrug off things and say oh death yes hallelujah praise the

Lord I'm glad when it comes now indeed death brings us as we'll see into the nearer presence of our God the example of our Lord is one we need to take greatly to heart because he was aware that death severs bonds of love death blights hopes and desolates hearts there is a painful parting because death is still the last enemy you see and our Lord Jesus doesn't exhibit some stoical heroic stiff upper lip figure he wept with those who wept he entered into the reality that death truly is but let me attempt to try and sketch out for you how I believe the Lord would have his believing people face the fact and experience of death there will be some overlap you would not be surprised to hear with our study this afternoon and the first great truth that ought to underpin and shape how we face the prospect of death is surely this we need to become conscious of the overruling loving and sovereign providence of our

God this great reality needs to lie at the heart of our human experience because if we are not conscious of the overruling loving and sovereign providence of God we would all but disintegrate in the face of death especially those deaths which are sudden those deaths which are traumatic the death of an infant the death of a wife the death of a husband the death of a friend we would not know how to begin to cope humanly speaking if our lives were not anchored in the conscious assurance that there is an overruling loving and sovereign providence at work in all the lives and ways of the children of God that's why verses such as Romans 8 28 need to be woven into the very fabric of our thinking all things work together for good to them that love

God and that is the reality the believer has to take with him as he buries maybe his infant child not that the pain and the sorrow are any less not that the heart take is any less but in the midst of it he holds on to the fact that as for this God he does all things well to them they're his and the day will come when he will reveal it and we will see it I wonder if we really are persuaded that the will of God really is good acceptable and perfect because apart from this we would be a prey to the deepest discouragements and darkest desolations that's why I say again this this doctrine this biblical doctrine that underpins the whole of God's revelation the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God is intended by God to be the deepest pastoral encouragement we could possibly hope to have in life if that were not so how could a man a husband or a wife a father or mother contemplate leaving a young family terminal illness is diagnosed the day draws near your husband perhaps is unemployed and your children would seemingly of course humanly speaking need you desperately how are you going to cope if your life is not held in the conscious assurance

[15 : 22] I belong to one who is God over all things blessed forever who is sovereign in all his ways mysterious dark incomprehensible indeed but sovereign and loving how do we cope if we feel ourselves about to be taken from a sphere of great spiritual usefulness if we were not persuaded that God knows what he's about that's why the words the words in Isaiah 55 which no doubt you all know so well should be words that the Christian often turns to for my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways declares the Lord as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts and isn't that precisely how our Lord Jesus Christ faced death now of course his death is unique the great sin bearing substitute of the people of

God but his death in another sense is the great example of the people of God but in the garden he wrestled at the end of his wrestling there came the calm not my will but thy will be done he reposed himself in the confidence that his father's will was good acceptable and perfect that his father's will was what was best for him and for humanity now that didn't mean that our Lord Jesus could face death still with equanimity even on the cross he cries out in his abandonment my God my God why have you deserted me why have you forsaken me but do you see that in the midst of his perplexity it was still the perplexity of faith it was my God my God why have you forsaken me Christians don't have all the answers for our

Lord was perplexed on the cross we ought not to give people the impression that we can rest happily in the sovereignty of God as if that were to take away all the trials the problems the perplexities the concerns far from it but it enables us in the very midst of them to bear up and to testify to his grace which is unfailing there is the conscious awareness and conviction of the loving sovereign providence of God there is secondly for the Christian the consciousness of his glorious and blessed hope and surely this is to be uppermost in the believer's mind and heart when he faces the prospect of his demise that before us we keep the biblical hope that God has revealed for us in his word this glorious hope that the scriptures speak so eloquently of you'll know these words

I'm sure in the 14th chapter of John's gospel let not your hearts be troubled said Jesus trust in God trust also in me and my father's house are many mansions but were not so I would have told you I am going there to prepare a place for you and there is the great believer's confidence that even now our Lord Jesus Christ is sitting out a home in glory for his blood-bought redeemed children even now the son of the most high is giving himself to preparing a place for us he will make sure that when we come into the glory we will enter into an inheritance undefiled prepared by him for us this is surely why Paul could speak as he does in Philippians chapter 1 for me he says to live is Christ and to die is gain what shall

I choose I do not know I am torn between the two I desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better for him that was not God's way at that moment but he saw that to be with Christ is far better the Christian is glorious and blessed hope there are two things to notice about that hope I think the solidity of its foundation where does the Christian's confidence ultimately lie in the fact that he has been joined indissolubly to a risen exalted and glorified saviour you know the time to read through 1 Corinthians 15 read these great verses at your leisure these verses which speak of the truthfulness the reality of the risen Christ and of the believers union with him because he lives we will live also

[20 : 49] I am the resurrection and the life he could say to these distressed women he that believes in me though he dies yet shall he live and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die this is why the Christian can sing oh death where is your victory oh grave where is your sting because we belong to one who has gone through you triumphantly who has conquered oh death we defy you as stronger than thou hath entered thy palace we fear thee not now our Lord Christ hath risen the tenter is foiled and if there is a solid foundation there is also the glorious prospect and that is nowhere more beautifully depicted for us than in Revelation 21 we've been preaching through

Revelation Sunday evenings in New Mills and next Sunday evening God willing we reach chapter 21 I've been waiting for a few weeks to do so after enough of beasts I must confess but you know these great verses where John sees this great vision of the holy city that is the people of God coming down prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them now that is the glory of heaven these next verses speak so beautifully of the fact that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away and that will be great but beloved I tell you that will be as nothing beside this the dwelling of God will be with men that will be the glory of Emmanuel's land to be with him will be all the glory that's why people who do not love Christ will be utterly out of place in heaven because heaven is all about being with

Christ and with God throughout eternity this is the great hope that God has set before his people death giving way to life in all its sinless fullness truly we can say I have not seen nor have he heard neither have entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for them that love him for a glorious and blessed hope God has set before his people to nerve our faint endeavours to keep us going on faithfully to the last thirdly when facing death the Christian needs to be greatly conscious of their need of the fellowship support and again we find this brought out so beautifully in the garden experience of our Lord in Mark 14 we read they went to a place called

Gethsemane and Jesus said to his disciples sit here a while while I pray and he took Peter James and John along with him and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled I find it quite striking that as our Lord in his holy humanity faced the dark mystery of death as only he alone could face us he would have with him friends and companions and the great sorrow was that these friends and companions could not in any sense enter in to the experience of our Lord but even according to our Lord they had failed him could you not keep awake but an hour to be with me to support me to pray for me to uphold me and help me how vital it is that our churches are the kind of places that could be described in the best of sense as spiritual hospitals where we are the kind of people who are able to draw near to those who face the valley of the shadow of death and the kind of people who are open enough to allow others to enter into our dark experiences of the kind of fellowship we need to be aiming at in all our churches and burdening our hearts allowing people near enough so that they can enter into our burden and help us to bear it and share it because you see the fellowship of the saints is one of the great means of grace to the people of

God we were not meant to live atomised individual lives as Christians we were made by God to be not only with him but to be with one another we are created to fit one another and how vital it is that we create within our congregations that kind of quality of Christian love and empathy whereby we can stand with our brothers and through prayer support them uphold them and help them as they face the dark mystery fourthly the Christian as he faces death needs to be greatly conscious of the enabling grace of God and there are two aspects to this enabling grace that the

[26 : 54] Christian greatly needs to take hold of because there are times when facing death can be the most traumatic of experiences I was with a man well two men these past two or three weeks I saw them wither away before my eyes I saw the anguish of soul that they were in I saw the toll that took on their families grace and oh how I prayed that they could see that there was grace to help even in the midst of that remember when Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 came to the law three times he besought the Lord to take this thorn in the flesh this burden from his life and God says no my grace is sufficient for you whatever hell you're going through Paul there is grace able to cope with and meet with that hell you see there is sufficient grace however dark your darkest experiences the grace of God is greater what a great comfort that is to the child of God as he goes into the dark experience of death grace to help not only is God's grace sufficient it's timely remember in Hebrews 4 we're exhorted to come boldly to the throne of grace there to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need you see none of us knows how we will fare when that day comes and maybe you're of a temperament that absolutely wants to shrink from even thinking about death maybe you feel that when that time comes you will utterly disintegrate and your

Christian testimony will disappear grace to help in time of need not before the time of need when the time of need comes there is grace available if we would have it God is able to meet us in our deepest need I wonder if we really believe that fifthly as the Christian faces death he needs to be conscious of the tender sympathy of his Lord and again these verses in Hebrews chapter 4 are great verses to take to heart Hebrews 4 15 for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are yet was without sin we have a saviour who in his humanity tasted death and he tasted death in a way we will never taste it because he experienced the full horror of death abandonment by

God and that's why he's able to help us because he's been there before us we have a heart that beats with human compassion and the glory we sometimes sing in one of the paraphrases I think with every pang that rends the heart the man of sorrows has a path he sympathizes with our grief and to the sufferer sends relief you know those occasions when you think but nobody knows what I'm going through nobody knows the hell I'm experiencing but there is one in heaven who has tasted hell in a way that none of us will ever taste the voice comes from the glory I've been there before you I know what you're going through and I'm able therefore to help you in the midst of it you know we need to concentrate more

I'm sure these days on the great pastoral implications of the glorified humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ that there is a man in heaven who wears our nature who not only bears us upon us on his heart but who has been there in all the human experiences of life before us who's been tempted in all points like as we are in all points because you see there are times when we think oh if people knew the way I've been tempted they'll have nothing to do with me we don't know what temptation is but there's a man in heaven who knows what temptation is because you see we fall we never stand to the bitter end he stood faithful to the bitter end and that's why when the Christian is going through whatever dark experience and especially perhaps the good experience of death he knows that the risen Lord has been there and his heart beats for him and is able to come alongside you know you've had a deep dark experience maybe your your pastor has preached helpful sermons and you feel somewhat comforted and encouraged and then someone comes alongside who has been precisely where you've been you know it can bring a whole new dimension to you they really understand they know what it's like they've gone through the treadmill before them they've experienced that and you feel in a sense more open to their ministrations and so it is with our

Lord Jesus Christ but 16 finally here obviously the Christian must be conscious of the unfailing presence of the Lord even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me there I think when all is said and done is the great bedrock support for the child of God as he faces that great last enemy he never faces it alone every step of the way he has a companion when death reaches out its hand to claim us he is there by our side never never alone and you see that's what the devil would have shut out from our minds he would have us forget the pledge of God his covenanted pledge in blood

[34 : 32] I'll never leave you nor forsake you you know the great thing about that verse in Psalm 23 and I often read it at funerals is that when the psalmist contemplated death he didn't say well you know I've laboured long and hard in the service of the Lord I've been used by God to win many when it came to the point he said I'll fear no evil because you are with me he turned away from himself he didn't look and say well yes there are marks of grace there are tokens of God's goodness and indeed these are good things to consider but no he had his mind where his mind and heart should have been you're with me there's my confidence I have a companion who is the living God yes death is a painful sore dark mystery a mystery that ought to cause us grief and sorrow and even anger a reality that would have us weep with those who weep at the end of the day for the

Christian there is the great unshakable assurance but to be with Christ is far better and secondly just very briefly consider with me what it means to face death as a non-Christian the greatest need for someone but a Christian is to see that the grave is not the end of things how often people have said to me at a funeral well you know at least his sufferings are over now God alone knows the heart and it is not for me or any Christian pastor to say how it will go with someone who dies who knows but that at the last moment God extends infinite electing mercy who knows though I must confess how often my heart has sank and there has been the thought Lord but what if today is but the beginning of his troubles and not the end of it you see there is such a thing as the second death the first death is the separation of our bodies from our souls the second death is the separation of our souls from God on Sunday evening we were reflecting in these last verses in Revelation chapter 20 where John says I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it and I saw the dead great and small standing before the throne and books were opened another book was opened which is the book of life the dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books the sea gave up the dead that were in it the dead that were in them and each person was judged according to what he had done and if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life he was thrown into the lake of fire the lake of fire is the second death you see what we need to remember is that death introduces us all

Christian and non Christian alike to the judgment seat of Christ we must all appear as Paul to the Corinthians before the judgment seat of Christ and that that judgment seat God will sift and examine our lives he will searchingly probe into the hidden recesses for there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed said our Lord death brings us to the day of ultimate final and irreversible reckoning and that's what this world wants to hide from because God has put intimations into the heart of man being made in his image man knows in his deepest being that death is not the end of things he knows because he is a spiritual being he knows that death is not the end that the grave does not mark the finish of life but he cannot face the fact of that which is beyond he wants to run and hide from reality you know it's staggering that it's the

Lord Jesus himself who speaks more than any other in scripture of the eternal separation that awaits all who die in unbelief think of Matthew 25 mind the great picture of the living Christ standing as it were in glory and the nations before him separating the sheep from the goats and saying to the one come you who are blessed by my father into the kingdom prepared from you from before the foundation of the world and saying to others depart from me you who are cursed into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels for the scripture would have us believe whatever men might say to the contrary whatever pious ecclesiastics might say to the contrary God says there will be a separation at the end and that demands we face death with biblical realism my friends if you are not a

Christian your greatest need is to take to heart the solemn but true warnings in God's word that it is an awful thing to fall into the hands of the living God unprepared but if your name is not found written in the Lamb's book of life that book simply records those who have repented and believed the day will come when God will cast you into the lake of fire whatever that means it means eternal separation and judgment I buried a man last Tuesday whom I don't think had been in church for 20 years his wife stopped coming the month or so after I came because I wouldn't have a burnt supper in the church that man was dying and I went to see him and he said to me

[41 : 41] Mr. Hamilton I fell out with the church long ago I said Bobby we're the church that will save you the lord of the church he says I know it I'm sure that man died believing he died looking as he said to me and to someone else I'm looking to the savior and he is saying come to me because you see death is God's last approach to many things to say to say wake up the day is about to dawn when the opportunity and the day of grace for you will be over wake up consider well heed before it's too late it was a joy to me to be able to say because not very often have I felt able to say it in sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body but to be with Jesus is far better

Christians ought to be the most realistic of people we ought to challenge the people around us to face up to realities and to ultimates and to eternals to pray that God might bring his awakening spirit so that people might listen to the gospel and find there the saviour who can bring them safely through that dark dark valley into the light of the glory of the presence of God Amen