

## *The Life*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on May 16, 2021.

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (John 11:17–27).<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus was dead, not figuratively but literally dead and buried. Since the Fall, death is a human certainty for all who precede our Lord’s return. Certain also is the pain of loss for loved ones, whether friend or family. As is well-known, the Son of God who became the Son of Man was not without human emotion. Before he arrived in Bethany, his friend, and the brother of his friends, had died. “Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

To weep at the loss of a life is to acknowledge the significance of someone, and even those in Christ leave us here with the absence of their presence. Some may push back against such a melancholy view of death arguing rather for a celebration of life. But I wonder if this modern perspective is merely a contrived means to momentarily laugh to keep from crying.

Death is the enemy of every living human being. It is no respecter of persons and waits for no one. But though we mourn death, as the ultimate evidence of our fallen condition, for those in Christ, we do not fear it. Rightly did Paul slander death, personified when he exclaimed, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55). Rightly did John Donne mock,

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;  
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.  
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.  
Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well  
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.<sup>2</sup>

By God's grace through faith in Christ we do not fear death. For as Jesus said to Martha, he says to us all, "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." What does Jesus mean by this? Let's consider first "everyone who lives," this earthly life.

### **Earthly Life**

In the beginning, God did not establish a process through which a living organism would eventually evolve into a man. Rather, "the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7). Thus human life commenced. God also created the woman from the man, and from them the earth would be populated.

Though created perfect and without sin, the man, Adam, broke God's covenant, resulting in due judgment. As God promised, "you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). From that point onward, every son and daughter born of Adam inherited the curse. Everyone who lives shall die.

And yet, nowhere in Scripture are we encouraged to disparage life, as if to think, as one author put it, "Life is just a slow march towards death" (Marley). Instead, we are told that life is a gift from God (Eccl. 5:18), and we are to enjoy what God gives us in it (Eccl. 2:24; 1 Tim. 6:17). But as we acknowledge life as a gift and enjoy its benefits, we do so knowing it is finite, and we are mortal. We also know that in this life joy is mixed with sorrow. We may cry tears of joy at the birth of a child and weep tears of sorrow at the death of a loved one. Life is God's gift; death is a curse.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, a life had been lost, Lazarus was dead. Many came to console his sisters, Mary and Martha, but Jesus' arrival was no consolation. A frustrated Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Her faith is remarkable as is her accusation. Similarly, a mournful Mary falls at Jesus' feet, saying, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." In agreement, the sisters who believed in Jesus as the Christ also believed that he had arrived too late to save a life.

There is never a moment too late for the One who created time. There is always purpose in his delay, as Jesus reveals at Lazarus' tomb, explaining to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:39). As John Piper puts it, "God's interest is to magnify the fullness of His glory by spilling over in mercy to us."<sup>3</sup> And so, Jesus lifts his eyes

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<sup>2</sup> John Donne, "Holy Sonnets: Death, Be Not Proud," Poetry Foundation, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44107/holy-sonnets-death-be-not-proud>.

<sup>3</sup> John Piper, "Our Good Is His Glory," Desiring God, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/our-good-is-his-glory>.

heavenward praying, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41-42). And then, he who is the Life cried out, “Lazarus, come forth,” (John 11:43, KJV), and Lazarus did indeed come forth, alive and well.

It is a beautiful and true story, and because of it many became followers of Jesus. But there is more to the story: Lazarus died. Lazarus was brought back to life, but it is still this life. He is still mortal. Like you and me, though Jesus brought him back to life, he still departed this earthly life by death, which makes Jesus’ conversation with Martha all the more valuable.

Jesus intentionally delayed his return to Bethany (John 11:6). He knew Lazarus would die (John 11:14). When Martha confronts him, he knows that he will raise Lazarus from the dead. But there is something more important than this earthly life, which is why Jesus points Martha past Lazarus’ earthly life and to the resurrected life.

### **Resurrected Life**

Martha knows that before her brother died Jesus could, and likely would, have healed him. She’d seen it before. She also has a deep faith, believing that with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26), and confessing, “even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Jesus is not put off by her presumption but responds confidently, “Your brother will rise again.” Whether Jesus means now or on the last day, we don’t know; Martha deduces the latter. She knows that her brother will be resurrected at the end of time, but it is today that she misses him most.

Jesus does not comfort Martha with what he is about to do. Instead, he tells her who he is: “I am the resurrection and the life.” Note carefully that he does not say that *he* gives resurrection and life, although he does. So united are they in him that he defines them. Therefore, the future resurrection of all who believe is contingent upon his resurrection. And as he resurrected from the dead, so will all who trust in him.

Thankfully, we are not left to guess what the resurrected life is like. In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul has much to tell us about it. In summary Paul tells us, first, Christ’s resurrection is our resurrection, (1 Cor. 15:12-19). Because of our union with Christ, his resurrection and ours are inseparable. If he resurrected, we shall; if he did not, we shall not: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ...Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (Rom. 6:5, 8). His resurrection is ours.

Second, Christ’s resurrection precedes our resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20-23). The apostle refers to this with the agricultural analogy of “first fruits.” The first fruits arrive at the beginning of the full harvest, and yet they are the same fruit. The blackberries I pick in my garden in May precede those I pick in late June, but they are all blackberries. Likewise, just as Christ resurrected from the dead in historical time so we will resurrect from the dead upon his coming on the last day. His resurrection precedes ours.

Third, our resurrected body will be like Christ's resurrected body (1 Cor. 15:35-49). As he revealed himself to his disciples, Jesus' body was similar but not identical, physically present yet immortal. So we will be. Paul uses the analogy of a seed planted in the ground that first dies and then yields life: "God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body" (1 Cor. 15:38). Unlike our mortal bodies, our resurrected bodies will be glorified:

Perishable becomes imperishable; dishonor becomes glory; weakness becomes power; natural becomes spiritual. Just as Adam was of the dust, so our mortal bodies will return, as the Book of Common Prayer so eloquently puts it, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," but in Christ we who have "borne the image of the man of dust" shall "bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49), Christ Jesus our Lord. Our resurrected body will be like his.

Fourth, Christ's resurrection assures our transformation (1 Cor. 15:50-58). Upon Christ's return, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, our bodies shall be transformed immortal. Unlike Lazarus, the resurrection of the body is not the resuscitation of a corpse. Because of the unity between Christ's resurrection and ours, we can be sure that we will be like him. Indeed, "we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."<sup>4</sup> Christ's resurrection assures our transformation and eternal life.

## **Eternal Life**

Sadly, many look from the resurrected life of Christ and the resurrected life we are promised not forward to eternal life but backwards. As a result, as Alister Begg observes, "we find ourselves complaining about everything, looking back to the good old days and worrying that the church cannot survive the empire of an aggressively secular post-Christendom. Too much of the public face of evangelicalism is characterized by angry venting or panicking—rather than prayerful, humble, calm, and confident belief in a sovereign God who is in control of things."<sup>5</sup> We who have a confident belief in our sovereign God, who controls all things for his glory, will calmly, humbly, prayerfully look toward eternal life, not as a form of Christianized escapism but with hope in the consummation of our redemption.

The resurrected life is more than, as one theologian put it, "the resumption and extension of a spoiled life."<sup>6</sup> Rather, in the new heavens and earth in our resurrected bodies we will live eternally untainted by sin, living as we were created, to the glory of God. We will not live under the curse, burdened by the inevitability of death, but in the eternal presence of our beloved Lord (1 Thess. 4:17).

This we are promised: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16), which is precisely where Jesus led Martha. While often remembered as the sister "anxious and troubled about many

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<sup>4</sup> "The Nicene Creed," in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, Inc., 1990), 846.

<sup>5</sup> Alister Begg, "Welcome to Exile: It's Going to Be Ok," The Gospel Coalition, April 29, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/exile-ok/>.

<sup>6</sup> Thistleton, *Last Things*, quoted in Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 827.

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things” (Luke 10:41), Martha reveals a sincere faith. “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” In her confession we hear that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

As her brother’s corpse awaited its miraculous resuscitation, her faith looks from death to life. Through faith in Christ, the Son of God, she does not fear death because she knows the Life. So also we can say with John that, “we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20).