

Promise of A Future

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much, Phil, and I'd like us just to turn for a week while together to that passage that Phil just read for us. Tonight, the title for our sermon is The Promise of a Future.

And one of the reasons I think it's helpful to think about this is because often as we go through life, we are conscious that now can sometimes be difficult.

The here and now is sometimes a challenge that can be true for us as individuals, that can be true for us globally, as is definitely the case at the moment. And I think in the midst of all of that, and the fact that sometimes we have really good weeks and the fact that sometimes we have really hard weeks, it's a great reminder that at the heart of the Christian faith are wonderful promises for the future.

And that's something that all of us have to reckon with and all of us have to think about. And it's actually something that can make a massive difference for today.

So with this title in mind, I want us to look again at this passage. I'll read these verses that we have in 25 and 26. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

[1 : 18] Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?

And we're just going to ask four questions as our headings tonight. What does this promise of a future tell us about God? What does the promise tell us about ourselves?

What is it that God's promising? And what does God require of us? So first question is, what does this promise tell us about God?

The context of these verses is the illness and death of Jesus's friend Lazarus. As Phil read to us, Jesus hears a report that Lazarus is ill and by the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, he has died.

And we have this fascinating insight recorded for us by John of the conversations that Jesus had first with Martha, then with Mary. We see that initial conversation with Martha where she comes to him and she says, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died.

[2 : 25] 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, do I know that he'll rise again in the resurrection at the last day?

And it's in response to these words that Jesus gives this promise, which where he says, when he gives one of the great I am sayings of John's gospel, he says, I am the resurrection, the life whoever believes in me though he die, yet he shall live.

So what does this tell us about God, first of all? Well what I want us to start with is just to have a key connection in mind as we look at this because here in these verses and in terms of what we're going to think about, we're being asked, I think, to think about the connections that exist between God and life.

Now I don't mean life just in the sense of going through life day to day or the story of your life. I mean the connection between God and life, the reality of life as something that exists.

I want us to start with that big, big picture in mind. If you look at the conversation, you see that Martha has been confronted by the death of her brother. It's in response to that that she looks to Jesus, she said, look, if you'd not been here then my brother would still be alive.

[3 : 42] He wouldn't be dead. Jesus says, well, your brother will rise again. This isn't the end of the story. There is life to come. And Martha gives an answer which is true but it's not quite the whole truth.

She says, I know that he'll rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Now that's a really important point, the fact that Martha believes in the resurrection.

But it seems that at this stage she thinks of that resurrection as a thing that happens then. The resurrection at the last day is a thing that's going to happen and it's going to happen then. And so in her mind it seems she's thinking in terms of an event, she's thinking in terms of the future. Now that's not wrong.

The resurrection is an event and it is going to take place then on the last day but it's not the whole truth. Because Jesus doesn't respond by saying, yes, at that resurrection, at that moment, that's what we need to look for.

[4 : 58] Look to that moment then. Jesus doesn't say that. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

Now that's incredible because Martha's thinking about the biggest event in history that lies ahead in the future and Jesus turns her attention to himself and he says, I am the resurrection and the life. So this is a massive statement that Jesus is making. As we mentioned a moment ago, this is one of the seven I am sayings that we often categorise in John's Gospel.

And these sayings, they all provide a crucial description of who Jesus is. But what I want us to see at this stage is that there's also crucial links being made to God himself because that I am has massive connotations to the Old Testament and God's revealing of himself as the great I am. So Jesus, when he says these words, he's pointing Martha to himself but in doing so, he's actually pointing her to God. He's identifying himself as divine.

[6 : 18] And so when Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life, he is teaching us very, very clearly about God. And he tells us that he, as God the Son, is two things.

I am the resurrection. I am the life. Now I want us just to unpack those terms a wee bit more. There's so much that we could think about in terms of those two things and I'm only going to just scratch the surface for a moment.

But I think it's helpful if we just stretch out these terms to think a little bit more about what they mean. So we've got resurrection and we've got life.

And I want us to have these two concepts just in our minds for a moment. Resurrection is pointing us to the last day, the end point in history, the big moment that everything is heading towards. That is the culmination of history. The life, that's pointing us to the big reality of what makes the universe more than just existence.

[7 : 30] So you look at the universe and you don't just look at it and say, oh, stuff exists. You say, there's life. The universe isn't just matter and objects and movements and forces.

There's life in amongst all of that. And although there's lots more that we could say, what I just want to identify just now is that if we could say it like this, that the resurrection is pointing us forwards to the last day.

The concept of life is pointing us backwards to the idea of the first day, the fact that there is life in existence.

So from beginning to end, from the very origins of the universe to the ultimate destiny of the universe, this is where our minds are being pointed.

And so these categories that we have here, we could make ourselves sound very clever and we could call it meta-realities, which is just another way of saying big stuff, the big stuff of life.

[8 : 40] This is getting us to think about origin. It's getting us to think about destiny. It's getting us to think about the whole of existence.

And the big question is this. What lies behind these meta-realities? What lies behind this big stuff? And lots of people have offered answers. Some people might say, well, the ultimate thing that lies behind all that is nothing. That's where it originates and that's where it culminates.

Others might think of, well, there's a force, there's obviously more than just nothing, but there's a force from which things originate and to which things are going. That was a very dominant kind of mindset in Greek philosophy, but lots of people still talk about it today because people talk about fate or whatever it may be, chance.

Some people apply it more in the realm of physics or looking at gravity. Others might look at DNA or whatever it may be. Some people think more in terms of a cycle. So like behind it all lies a kind of cycle that keeps going round and round and round, a machine that keeps on turning.

[9 : 52] There's lots of different offers, lots of different answers offered to this question. What is it that lies behind the big meta-realities of existence? The Bible says something totally different and totally amazing.

The Bible says that behind all of these meta-realities is a person.

And that is central to a biblical worldview. Now a biblical worldview is something that every single one of us needs to cultivate more and more, that we look at the whole world through the lens of the Bible, that we understand the world according to the information that the Bible gives us.

And at the heart of a biblical worldview is the fact that the absolute that underlies all reality is a person.

And that person has life. So he thinks, speaks, acts and relates. And that person gives life.

[11 : 02] So every other manifestation of life comes from him. All of that means that the foundation of life, the foundation of all reality, the foundation that lies behind all these meta-realities is not something, it's someone, our two real living someone.

And that someone, that person is Jesus Christ. That's why we could say this morning when we saw the big language of the letter to Leo de Sia, where Jesus being the Amen, the first one, the two one, when we think of Jesus being the beginning of all creation, the firstborn, that he is the one that lies at the heart of everything, at the heart of reality is a person.

Now a good way to do this is maybe to think of a musician. If you think of a musician that you like, if you think of, say, like a CD or a Spotify soundtrack that you like listening to, you think of somebody, say it was somebody who was a really good piper.

And you'd bought lots of CDs, famous piper, and you loved listening to them. We picked Tixie because he's my favourite piper. Imagine Tixie had a CD, a piping, which he should have, but he never will have, but he should have.

Tixie is going to put up a concert and we were all going to come. If you got there and all that was on the stage was a set of bagpipes and a chair, then the whole thing would be a waste of time.

[12 : 41] Because behind it all lies a person. Whenever you have music or anything like that, it's a person that lies behind it all. The biblical worldview tells us that that's exactly how the universe works.

Behind the universe is Jesus. Now, that tells us two massive things. It tells us, first of all, just how huge this statement is that Jesus is making.

When he says, I am the resurrection and the life, he is saying that he's the foundation of all reality and he is the end point of all reality. You can't have a first day, you can't have a last day without Jesus.

He is the one who lies at the centre of all existence. He is the ultimate meta-reality. But the second thing it tells us is that the someone who lies behind all existence, the absolute from which everything else comes, is someone who is lovely, someone who is so good.

He's kind, wise, patient, fair, true, generous, compassionate.

[14 : 08] That's what makes the biblical worldview amazing because it tells you that if you peel back the universe to reach its ultimate source, you find loveliness in Jesus.

And perhaps most importantly of all, this person is a son. That means that he's not solitary. We're not talking about some isolated being that's kind of above everything and kind of blissful isolation and untouched by anything.

He's a son. That means he's relational. He is loved and he loves. He is dependent and he is dependent upon. He's precious to his father.

His father is precious to him. The Bible's absolute is the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And at the heart of that is the most beautiful, incredible relationship of love.

Now I hope all of that isn't sort of too complicated or anything like that, but it's so good to think about that, to think about the massive truths of reality and to see that behind reality is not a dead thing.

[15 : 24] It's a living person. It's him. It's Jesus. And there's a crucial consequence of this. It's telling us that the norm for reality is not deadness.

The norm for reality is life. If you look at my scribbles on there, at the heart of everything is a person. It's Jesus from the first day to the last day. He is the living one.

He is the life. The norm for reality is life. Now we'll pick up that again in a wee minute, but I want us to pick up our second question, which is what does this promise tell us about ourselves?

Well it tells us something very simple, but something absolutely crucial. It's telling us that your life is precious.

We said at the start that we're making a connection, we've been forced to make a, just to recognize the connection between God and life in this passage. That behind all life, all reality is God.

[16:33] Your life comes from him. Your life is precious to him. Now you might think to yourself, well I know that. I know my life is precious. I try to look after my life, try to make sure to stay healthy. I try to preserve my life, and I'm not reckless with my life.

And I'm sure you do know that. But what I want us to recognize is that your life is way, way more precious than we tend to realize.

Because we tend to think that life is precious because it's short and fragile. Now that's true in some ways.

Life is short, life is fragile, so we tend to think life is precious, make the most of it. And that's not a bad way to think. It is important to make the most of every day.

But we tend to think life is precious because life is short. God doesn't think like that. God thinks life is precious. Make it last forever.

[17:36] Not make the most of it while it lasts. Make it last forever. So when we read about Lazarus being ill, when we read of two sisters you've lost a brother, we think, well, that's a shame, but it's normal.

And Thomas sums that up well in verse 16 when he says, well, let's just go to Bethany and we'll die with him because in the disciples' minds death seems inevitable. And that's something that every human seems to agree on.

Death is just inevitable. Well, it's going to happen sometime. We just have to accept it. Jesus does not think like that.

For Jesus' death is not normal. Death is not inevitable. Death is fundamentally wrong.

And that's brought out very powerfully in verse 33, which is one of my favorite verses. It says, 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.

[18:41] Now, I need to say a little bit about the translation here because it's very rarely that I would say this because I think the ESV is a fantastic translation of the Bible, but this verse is not translated very well because that phrase there deeply moved in his spirit.

Well, not quite in his spirit, but that's a separate word. But the deeply moved bit, he was deeply moved. What's translated deeply moved. It's not a very good translation because the word there means outraged.

And deeply moved makes it sound a bit sort of like, oh, well, he's upset that he's bothered. That's not what the word is saying. He is outraged at what he is witnessing.

To Jesus, the illness and death of this man was wrong. The pain that these sisters felt was wrong. The agony of separation was wrong.

To Jesus, death is not just some part of life that's always going to be there. To Jesus, death is an outrage. And no wonder it's an outrage because he's the life.

[19:50] He's the source of all life. And it says, though, Jesus is standing before the tomb of his friend Lazarus and his arch-enemy is mocking him.

He says, look at this, look at what I've done. Look at these precious people who are dying. Lazarus is just one of many lives that you created, but that you can't save.

It's as though death is just mocking Jesus. No wonder he is outraged. No wonder he says, take that stone away. No wonder he says, Lazarus, come out.

And in doing that, he's giving us a glimpse of what his mission is all about. His come to give life. And that tells you that your life matters.

It's telling you that when you are ill, when you're hurt, when you are confronted with death, the absolute of the universe is outraged.

[20:49] Why? Because you matter to him. Because your life is so precious.

So what is God promising? Our third question. Well, we go back to our verses. We can see it. In this chapter, there's a kind of inevitability about death.

Thomas shows it. He says, well, let's just go up there and we'll die as well. Martha and Mary show it. They're like, oh, if only you'd been here, but you weren't. And we all face the same kind of reality that death just seems inevitable, unavoidable, inescapable.

So no matter what the story of our lives might be, the final clause will be, yet he will die.

So you picked my life, Thomas. He'll do lots and lots and lots of stuff. So he'll go to school, it's primary into the Nikki. He'll meet you now.

[21 : 58] He'll get married. He'll have children. He'll go to Carl away, go to Edinburgh, go to Carl away, do whatever it is. Last statement, yet he will die. And it doesn't matter whose name I put there.

Everyone's is the same. That's the last clause of our lives. And it's inevitable. And the reality of that final clause kind of minimizes all the stuff that maybe lies in between because ultimately all of that is going to be overtaken by that final clause, yet he or she will die.

But the key point of the verses that we have before us here is that Jesus is promising us a new inevitable.

That's the inevitable of our lives. Thomas starts off, but that's the inevitable ending. Jesus is promising us a new inevitable. And you can see that so beautifully in the way the language is used here.

Jesus is on the resurrection of life. Whoever believes in me, though he die. I don't know what the kind of proper grammatical term for that is, but these words are basically, I don't know what the proper word for it is.

[23 : 17] Donnie, you can teach me afterwards. But it's basically what I would call it doesn't matter statement. So if you look at the construction of the sentence, it's like though he died, but actually that doesn't matter.

Though he died, that actually doesn't matter because it's the words that come after that have the final say. In other words, the though he may die or though she may die, but that is not the inevitable bit.

There's a new inevitable. The new inevitable is yet he shall live.

And there's no comeback. Everyone who believes in Jesus will never die. And that changes everything.

In other words, if you trust in Jesus, the inevitable of your life is not yet he will die.

[24 : 22] It's yet he or she will live. That is the difference that Jesus makes.

That's the mission that he has come to accomplish. We can just put a magnificent scribble through that word because the inevitable changes through everything that he has done for us.

And this all makes perfect sense. The reason that you're inevitable can now be life is because the absolute of the universe is a living person.

The one from whom you come and from whom everything comes is a living person. And this is something that's absolutely crucial for us to recognize in terms of how we view reality.

Most common today's view of reality is something a little bit like this. So if you think about that, the start of that line is the origins of the universe.

[25 : 26] The end of that line is the destiny of the universe. And in the middle, life is a kind of blip in the middle. So whatever your understanding of the timeframes of life on earth or in the universe, whatever it may be, you've got the whatever billion years or whatever your view is in this period.

Let's just say a hundred, a thousand billion. I don't know what the numbers are, but something like that. But outside of that, you've just got nothing. So life here, this bit of life here is a blip in the middle.

Ultimately, I need to rub that line at the end because I didn't want it. Ultimately, there is going to be a death erection. Sorry for a terrible spelling.

But in other words, a death erection where everything is going to die. Isn't that what people say?

Because the people are going to die, the universe is going to die, everything is going to die. The general worldview today is that there's going to be a death erection at the end because the origin is death and the destiny is death and life in the middle is just a blip.

That's the way many people view the world. That the norm for reality is deadness. That life is an anomaly and at the end, there will be a death erection.

[26 : 53] The Bible says the opposite. The absolute norm for reality is life. It originates with the living God.

And in the midst of that, the anomaly is sin that has brought death into the experience of humanity and brought a curse into the experience of the creation.

But ultimately, there is not going to be a death erection, there is going to be a resurrection, a restoration back to life.

And the whole point of Jesus' mission is to break the power of death, to undo that anomaly, to put things right and to give you life.

Because the whole point of Jesus' death is to give life. That's why we were created. We weren't created to die, we were created to live.

[27 : 53] Jesus has come to give life because he is the life and that's what lies at the heart of all reality.

That's why he can see, I am the resurrection and I am the life. I'm the one who can do it all. To be accomplished by dying on the cross and rising again.

At the heart of that life are two things. Individual preciousness. I wish I could write faster, I can talk faster than I can write.

Individual preciousness and precious togetherness. Jesus restores your life because you are precious as an individual.

You're part of that story that originated in the mind of God that culminates in the resurrection at the last day. You're part of that.

[29 : 04] The mission that took Jesus all the way to the cross. You're part of that. You are so precious as an individual. You matter so much to Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't just restore you to life so you can just have life as an individual and exist on your own. Jesus restores your life so you can be part of something bigger so that people can enjoy your company and you can enjoy theirs.

So there's this incredible preciousness of the individual but there's also this beautiful togetherness of the family and the community. Church membership is just a glimpse into that.

Being part of a church family is a foreshadow of that. What we do as a church together is a beautiful expression of that. Different individuals for whom Jesus died together in one family of brothers and sisters.

There's individual preciousness, there's precious togetherness and it seems so clearly in Lazarus because Jesus wept at the grave of this individual.

[30 : 12] Lazarus the individual matters to Jesus and you the individual matter to him as well. But the amazing thing about Lazarus is that we never hear him talk.

He's one of the most famous people in the Bible yet you never hear a word spoken by him. Instead he is always described in terms of his relationship to other people.

He's a friend, he's a brother, his death has mourned but then in the next chapter we read of him having a meal and everyone is enjoying being together.

Jesus promises you life because you are precious to him and because you are precious to others, you have a precious place in his family.

The amazing thing is that by being brought into Jesus' family we can enjoy that individual preciousness that nothing else can give us but yet we can also enjoy the amazing togetherness that being part of a family involves.

[31 : 14] That's why if you read into chapter 12 you'll see what's the next thing that you discover about Lazarus. He's having a meal with Jesus and I think that is absolutely deliberate that you've got Lazarus, he's dead, he's in the tomb, he's raised together and then he's raised to life and then they're together again as a family enjoying a meal.

I think that's so deliberate because it's pointing us exactly to what Jesus wants to do. He wants to give us life so that we can be together and that new life isn't just something for the last day, it starts now.

The church is a glimpse of that and that is why deadness and sin and hostility and separation have no place in the church at all.

And that is why when Lazarus came out of the grave Jesus says unbind him, let him go, get the grave clothes off him, loose him, free him because those clothes do not belong on him and the stench of death and the restriction of the grave clothes and the reminder of death and sorrow does not belong on him.

You need to unbind him and let him go and that's exactly how we are to be as Christians that we've been freed, brought into new life, we're unbound from the chains of sin, from the stench of death and from all the muck and mess that that brings into our lives and we have a freedom where we can go on together as a community that love one another and that serves and honours Jesus.

[33 : 02] That new life will be ultimately consummated on the last day but it begins now. That's why every single person who sees us together as a church community should be seen a glimpse of heaven because that's exactly what we are or certainly what we're meant to be.

Last question, what does God require of us? This is the coolest part of all because we think of everything that we've spoken about. We're talking about the absolute of all reality. We're thinking about what God has planned and foreordained from the beginning of time. We think what Jesus is going to accomplish on the last day when he returns. You think of all that he achieved on the cross and everything that he's done in bringing individuals into his glorious community. Jesus has done an incredible amount. What does he require of us? Nothing except to believe. That's it. You just have to believe. But the key point is that we don't believe in things.

[34 : 18] We believe in a person. We believe in him.

And that's why we're not looking for people to become members of the church to say, I believe this doctrine, that doctrine, that doctrine, I believe this part of the Bible, that part of the Bible, I know it all. I know this, that and the next thing. I can explain all this and I understand it all.

We're not looking for that kind of knowledge. We're not looking for people who believe a whole pile of things and can explain them. We're looking for people who say, I believe in Jesus because I know that I need him and everything else follows on from that.

And this, I hope, makes sense, the absolute of the universe is a person, Jesus, and all he requires of us is to trust him to believe in him.

That's the astounding truth of the gospel. It goes from the massive meta realities of all existence down to the simplest command to just trust him.

[35 : 26] Jesus is saying, I am the resurrection of the life. I am the absolute of the universe. I am the source of all life. I am the beginning. I am the end. You are precious to me.

Your life matters to me. I have come to save you from death. I am outraged that death is threatening you. I've come to save you. In fact, I've come to die instead of you.

And though you may suffer, though you may get ill, though you will die physically, yet you will never die because I will take you to be with myself. And forever, I will delight in you.

And you can delight in me and with all your brothers and sisters with whom we can enjoy amazing togetherness for all eternity. And for that to happen, Jesus says, I will do everything, absolutely everything.

You don't have to do anything. All you have to do is trust me.

[36 : 33] And that's why the single most important question that anyone in here or anyone watching online will ever ask themselves is what Jesus says here.

Amen. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we bow before you and we rejoice in you because you're the resurrection and the life. Thank you.

And we just want to say wow. And we want to thank you so much for that truth. Amen. God bless you.