The Promise of a Future

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Date: 30 August 2020

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[0:00] Well, I'd like us just to spend a bit of time turning back to the passage that we looked at there in John's Gospel in chapter 11.

One of the many things that's wonderful about the Bible is that it gives us many promises. And that's one of the many things that's wonderful about God, that he gives us promises and he keeps those promises.
And so if you go through the Bible, you find a wonderful range of promises. He promises to be with us. He promises to support us. He promises to comfort us, to strengthen us.
In so many ways, God gives us promises. And these promises are a huge help for us today as we go through our Christian lives. And it would be brilliant for us all to go into Monday morning tomorrow and remembering more of the promises that God has given to us to help us through each day.
So these daily promises that God gives are really important. But the promises that God gives in the Bible are not just for today or for the here and now.
[1:13] Possibly the most amazing promises of all are the promises that are actually to do with our future. And that's what I want us to think about today.

The promise that God gives us for our future as Christians. And in order to do that, I want us to to just focus together on the great words of John 11 verses 25 and 26.
I should probably say I'm going to just bring these verses up onto your screen as we go through our sermon today. Some people are very, very high tech.
I'm afraid I've gone old school and I've just got bits of paper here. But hopefully they'll help us to see a little bit more of what Jesus is saying to us. So these are our focus verses. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.
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?
[2:19] And to do that, we're going to just ask four very simple questions concerning God's promise. Well, first of all, we'll ask, what does the promise tell us about God? Then we'll ask, what does the promise tell us about ourselves?

Third question, what is God promising? Fourth question, what does God require of us? So that's our basic headings as we look at these great verses together. So first of all, what is this promise telling us about God?
Well, the context of these words are the illness and death of Jesus's friend, Lazarus. As we were reading, Jesus hears this report that Lazarus is unwell.
But by the time Jesus gets to Bethany, he has died. And the narrative takes us through what happened. As Jesus approaches Bethany, Martha comes to meet him.
And John records the conversation for us. We see that in verses 21 to 24. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.
[3:28] 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. And it's in response to these words, in response to this conversation, that we get this great promise.

Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live. And that, of course, is one of the great I am sayings of John's gospel.
So what does that teach us about God? Well, I think the key point that's been emphasized here is that this statement is making a connection between God and life.

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And that's what I want us just to think about a wee bit together under this first question. If you look at the conversation, Martha comes to Jesus.
She's been confronted by the death of her brother. And she looks to him for help and says, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died. But even now, even now, I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.
[4:43] And Jesus responds to her by saying, you know, it's almost as if she says, no, don't worry, your brother will rise again. And Martha responds to that by saying, well, yes, I know, I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

Now, clearly, Martha believes in the resurrection. And what she says is absolutely true, but it's not quite the whole truth.
So she believes in the resurrection, but she very much thinks of it as a thing that's going to happen then. So it's like it's the last day. So it's going to be way, way, way, way, way in the future.
And so way, way, way forward, she has hope for her brother. But she tends to think of the resurrection as a thing that will happen then.
The resurrection, she's thinking of it as a thing and a then, way, way in the future. Now, that's not wrong, but it's not the whole truth. Jesus responds by saying, I am the resurrection and the life.
[5:58] And this is crucial in terms of revealing who Jesus is. As we said, this is one of the I am sayings, which are central to the Gospel of John.

And of course, have very strong links back to the Old Testament, because when God revealed himself in Exodus chapter 3 to Moses, he said, that's my name, I am. So when Jesus is saying, I am, he's very much identifying himself as God.
And so there's this very, very deliberate link between this statement and the very nature of God.
And so when you look at that statement, when Jesus says, I am, that's very, very strong words pointing us to the fact that this is teaching us about God.
And then Jesus teaches us two things, actually, within this one saying. He's saying, I am the resurrection. And he says, I am the life.
Now, what I want to say is that these two words, resurrection and life, are pointing us towards what we can call meta realities.
[7:16] Now, that's just a fancy way of saying big stuff. You're thinking about all the big truths of existence.

And Jesus is saying that he is the resurrection. And he's saying that he is the life. And these both these words are pointing us to the big meta realities of existence.
As we said, the resurrection is pointing us back, pointing us forward to the last day, as Martha herself said, pointing us forward to that moment when Jesus will return.
In many ways, life is pointing us backwards to the very beginning, to when God created life and existence and consciousness and experience actually began.
So these words are pointing us to the big, big stuff of the universe, the very beginning and the very end. And the big question that you kind of have to ask is what lies behind these meta realities?
[8:23] What lies behind the big stuff in the universe? And of course, people around us have lots of answers to that question. Some people will say, well, behind all existences is a force, you know, like gravity or chance or DNA or fate.

Some people might think that behind reality lies a kind of restart pattern where things go round in a circle and things come, take place over and over and over again.
And other people will say, well, behind all of reality, behind the beginning and the end, there's actually nothing. Jesus is telling us that the Bible's message is that behind these meta realities.
Persians. It's not fate. It's not chance. It's not gravity. It's not nothing. It's a person. And that means that at the heart of the Bible's worldview is that the absolute that underlies all reality is a person.
And the key point that the Bible then makes is that that person has life. So he thinks, he speaks, he acts, he relates.
[9:54] But not only does that person have life, that person gives life. So all other life comes from him. So you have a person who has life, who's then able to give life to the rest of reality that has come into existence.

All of it means that according to the Bible, the foundation of all meta realities is not something.
It's someone. A true, real, living someone. And that person is Jesus Christ.

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And that's where we see the magnitude of what Jesus is saying here to Martha and to all of us. Let me try and illustrate a wee bit better what I mean.
Some of you are probably aware of this, but many of you may not know that your interim moderator, Ivor Martin, almost had another career.
[11:04] You may know this or may not know this, but Ivor is actually a very talented musician. And I think had he not ended up in ministry or in engineering and had he pursued that musical career, I think the whole world would have forgotten about who Bob Dylan was.

And instead we would have Ivor Martin as the musical hero of the past 40 years. I want you to imagine that that happened and that Ivor Martin was actually, instead of being a longstanding minister and principal of ETS, imagine that he actually was a global music superstar.
Imagine you had a CD of Ivor that you loved listening to. Someone gave it to you, you started listening and you thought, oh, wow, this is absolutely brilliant. And, you know, you listen to it over and over again.
You subscribe to him on Spotify and you became a big fan. And one day you decided to buy tickets to go and hear him. So Ivor had sold out Ptodri for a big concert and you got tickets to go and finally hear him in real life.
Imagine that you got there and and when you arrived there, all that was sitting there was a chair, a guitar and a speaker.
[12:30] There was no one else there. If you went there, then you think, well, that doesn't make any sense because nothing would happen. You just sit and watch this chair, guitar and speaker doing nothing because the whole thing only works if Ivor is there to perform.

In other words, from the first day when you got a CD of Ivor Martins to the day when you finally got to the concert, behind the music is a person.
And that's true of whoever it is that you might actually listen to. That is exactly what Jesus is saying about the universe.
Behind the universe is a person. Now, that tells us two things. One, it tells us how massive this statement is from Jesus.
He is saying that he is the foundation of reality. He is the end point of reality. You can't have a first day or a last day without Jesus. He is the center of all existence.
[13:39] He is the ultimate meta reality. But the second thing it shows you is that the someone who lies behind the universe, the absolute from which all else comes, is someone who is lovely.

He is kind, wise, fair, patient and compassionate. And that means that if you peel back the universe again and again and again to get to its ultimate source, you will find loveliness.
But most importantly of all, this person that lies at the foundation of all reality, this person is a son. And that means he is not solitary. He's not isolated. Instead, he is relational. He is loved. He loves. He is dependent upon and he himself depends upon his father.
He is precious to his father and his father is precious to him. Reminding us of the fact that the Bible's absolute is the living God, the living persons of father, son and spirit.
[15:04] Now, I really hope all of that makes sense. What I'm trying to say is that Jesus is simply telling us that the absolute behind reality is not a dead thing.

It's a living person. It's him. And that means that the norm for reality is not deadness.
The norm for reality is life. And that comes back to what we were saying, that we have this great connection between God and life being made in this statement. If this is the foundation of the universe and of all reality, we are being told that that foundation is a person who is alive.
And everything else, whether it's gravity or DNA or nothing, that is all deadness. That's not the foundation of reality. The foundation of reality is life in the person of Jesus Christ.
So that's our first question. What does it teach us about God? Question number two is, what is this promise telling us about ourselves?
[16:17] Well, the key thing that I think this is telling us is that your life is precious.

Now, you might think to yourself, well, I know that. I'm aware of how precious my life is. But I think that's what I hope we'll see is that we are being shown here that your life actually matters way, way more than we tend to realize.
Now, we tend to think that life is precious because it's short and fragile. And that, of course, is true in many ways.

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And it's something that's been really powerfully presented before us over these last few months of lockdown. So we tend to think life is precious.
Make the most of it. But God doesn't think like that. God thinks life is precious.
[17:26] Make it last forever. So when we read of Lazarus being ill and when we read of two sisters losing their brother, we tend to think, well, that's a shame.

But it's normal, I guess. And Thomas sums it up quite well in verse 16 when he's like, well, he's going to die. Let's go and die with him. It's as though death just seems inevitable.
The key point is that Jesus does not think like that. To him, death is not normal. Death is not inevitable. To him, death is fundamentally wrong.
And that is brought out very, very powerfully in verse 33. I should have actually mentioned that I have the ESV on my pieces of paper.
So there may be tiny differences between what I have before me and what we read. But the translations are very close between the ESV and the NIV. This is the ESV. This is verse 33.
[18:29] And it says, when Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. Now, I want to just explain a little bit about the translation of this verse, particularly this phrase.

He was deeply moved in his spirit. That translation is also sometimes translated that Jesus sighed. Sometimes it says Jesus groaned. And when we think of moved in spirit, you know, we would probably tend to think of somebody, you know, very sort of sympathetically, sadly looking on at this situation.
None of these translations are really quite accurate. Because it's one word that is used in Greek for this phrase.
And it doesn't mean sighed and it doesn't mean groaned. What the word actually means is outraged. Literally, the word means to snort.
[19:46] And that was an idiom for expressing absolute outrage, snorting with anger.

And so to Jesus, the illness and death of this man is an absolute source of anger. To him, it is wrong. Lazarus's death is wrong.
The pain of these sisters is wrong. The agony of separation in a family is wrong. So to Jesus, death is not just part of life. To Jesus, death is an outrage.
And no wonder it's an outrage because he is the source of life. He is the foundation of all other meta realities. He is the foundation of the universe. He is the one who gives life.
He is the life. And it's as though Jesus is standing before the tomb of his friend. And his arch enemy, the devil, is mocking him, saying, look at this. Look at all these precious people dying.
[20:51] Lazarus is just one of the many lives that you can't save. And it's no wonder that Jesus is outraged. And no wonder he said, take that stone away. And no wonder he said, Lazarus, come out.

And in doing this, he is giving us a glimpse of what his mission is about. He has come to give life. And that tells you that your life matters.
You might think that you live the most kind of insignificant, normal, boring, mundane life that God barely even notices. That is not true. Your life matters to him.
So when you are ill, when you are hurt, and when you are confronted with all the horribleness of death, the absolute of the universe is outraged.
Why? Because you matter to him. We are being taught in this promise that our lives are precious and that death is fundamentally wrong.
[22:01] In the eyes of God. Question number three is, what is God promising to us?

Well, let's just go back to our verses 25 to 26. And we should see. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. 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 as we said, in the early parts of this chapter, there's kind of an inevitability about death.
Thomas shows it. Martha shows it. Mary shows it. They all sort of say, oh, if only you'd been here. And we face exactly the same.
So all around us, although people want to push death back as far as they possibly can, yet at the same time, there's just an acceptance that it's inevitable.
[23:05] And it means that for all of us, if you like, the final clause of our lives is going to be, yet he or she will die.

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So that's, if you like, the kind of last sentence on our lives. So we might do lots of things. So we might get a really good job. We might be able to buy a really nice house.
You might do really well at uni or at college. You might have a lovely family. You might be brilliant at sport.
You might even see Aberdeen FC win something once again. Lots of things might be achieved in our lives.
But whatever it is, the final clause is going to be the same. Yet he will die. Yet she will die.
[24:13] It's inevitable. And in the face of that, all of this stuff seems to kind of lose its significance. But if you look at these verses, verses 25 and 26, I'm not very good at grammar.

So I don't quite know what the kind of technical term for this is. This phrase here, though he die. If you look at this sentence, you'll see that it's just tucked into these wee commas here.
And I think it might be parenthesis you're meant to call that. I don't know. But what I'm going to call that statement there is what we would call a it doesn't actually matter statement.
Now, if anyone has an English degree, you can tell me what that actually should be called. But what I'm trying to say is that you look at the sentence and that this bit actually doesn't matter. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live.
So you can almost just ignore that bit. Whoever believes in me, he shall live. And this bit actually doesn't matter.
[25:29] And that's the extraordinary difference that Jesus makes. Because to us, the dying is the inevitable bit.

And Jesus is saying that because of him, there is a new inevitable. Though he die, yet he shall live. In other words, if you put your trust in Jesus, all this stuff here, we have all these good things that we achieve. But the end clause is, the inevitable end clause is yet he shall die.
If you trust in Jesus, these words change. Sorry, that pen doesn't work. And instead of it being yet he or she shall die, it's he or she will live.
And right there, you see the incredible difference that Jesus makes. And the reason that that inevitable can change, it makes perfect sense.
[26:39] The reason that that can change is because the absolute of the universe is a living person. We tend to think that death is the most inevitable absolute that humans face.

Jesus is saying that is not true. That's actually completely wrong. And it's crucial that we recognize this because it changes the way we understand reality.
Most people will look at reality like this. It starts with deadness, with nothing. There's a kind of blip in the middle where life appears.
But then it's going to disappear again and be gone. So this is across here is the billions and billions of years of the universe. Life is this kind of blip in the middle.
It starts with nothing. And it's going to end with, if you like, what you call a death erection at the end. Where everything just stops.
[27:45] The universe implodes. And the blip of life that lasted a wee while is gone. Jesus is telling us the opposite.

For the Bible, that is not reality. For the Bible, life is the norm. It starts with the life-giving God who has life in and of himself.
Father, Son, and Spirit. And it's death that's the anomaly. The death caused by sin and the experience of human life and of creation.
That's the anomaly, not the norm. And the great goal is not that death is going to win and that there will be a death erection. The great goal is that life will return and there will be a resurrection.
And this anomaly will be gone. And it's reminding us of the incredible difference that Jesus makes to us all.
[28:49] The Bible is telling us that Jesus has come to break the power of death. That he has come to undo the anomaly.

To put right what's gone wrong. And to give you the life that you are always meant to have had. And at the heart of that life is two wonderful things.
You have both individual preciousness and you have precious togetherness.
Two things. Individual preciousness and precious togetherness. And please forgive me for my terrible writing, but you know what I'm trying to say.

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Individual preciousness, precious togetherness. Now what do I mean by that? Well, it's reminding us that the whole reason Jesus has come to restore life is because you are precious to him as an individual.
[29:54] Your life matters to him. But the life that Jesus comes isn't just individualistic and it isn't just about us. It's also so that other people can enjoy your company and you can enjoy theirs so that we can be together as a living, alive family.

It's the opposite of what Martha, Mary and Lazarus experienced. They had this family that loved being together and they were being torn apart by death. Jesus has come to do the very opposite, to take the individuals who are separated by death and to bring them into a family so that they can be together again and enjoy one another and never have that threat of separation hanging over them again.
And all of this is seen so clearly in Lazarus. Jesus wept at his grave because Lazarus, the individual, matters. He was his friend and he cared about him.
And you matter to Jesus in exactly the same way. Lazarus himself was so precious as an individual. But one of the things that's really interesting about Lazarus is that we never hear him speak.
He never speaks in scripture. Instead, he is always described in terms of his relationship with others.
[31:16] So he's a friend. He's a brother. He's always described in terms of others. His death was mourned. And then in chapter 12, we read of him having a meal where everyone is enjoying being together.

And so Jesus promises you life because you are precious to him. And he promises you life because you are precious to others as well. And the great goal is that we can be together, that we can enjoy this amazing togetherness as individuals who are precious to God.
And I think the meal that Lazarus has in chapter 12 is a wee glimpse of this. Lazarus is raised from the dead. He isn't kind of placed in a museum on his own as the one who was raised up from the dead.
The next time we see him, he's just, he's having dinner with his family and friends. They're being together and enjoying that company.
And all of this is reminding us that in Jesus, we have this amazing new life for us as individuals and for us together in God's family.
[32:30] And what we must remember is that this starts now. Remember, we said that Martha was in danger of thinking that the resurrection was just something that happened way down the line then.

And what we have been shown here is that the resurrected life that Jesus gives isn't just for way, way, way down the line. It's for now as well. It begins now.
And the place where we are to see the glimpse of that new life bursting into the world is in the church. Where we see people who are treated with such preciousness because they are so precious.
And we see togetherness that is so beautiful where we join together as a family. And again, this is what's illustrated very clearly in the narrative.
Because when Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb, he came out, his hands and feet were bound with linen strips, his face wrapped with a cloth.
[33:35] And Jesus said, unbind him and let him go. And these are incredibly important words because it's reminding us, if you think of this as Lazarus, who's come out of the grave and he's kind of covered in all these grave clothes.

It's as though the kind of the weight of sin and brokenness is still kind of trying to hold on to him and restrict him. And Jesus is saying, get all that off him.
Loose him and let him go. And it's exactly the same for us. We come into God's kingdom with kind of the clothes of sin clinging to us, still trying to imprison us, hold us and restrict us.
And God is saying, loosen, let him go, get all that horrible restriction and brokenness of sin off them.
Which is why as Christians, we live our lives not kind of clothing ourselves with sin.
We live our lives in obedience to Jesus, throwing off the sin and all the restriction and difficulty and pain that that brings. That's why the church is meant to be a place where you don't see the old horrible clothes of bitterness and gossip and complaining and negativity and lies and slander.

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[34:46] It's where you go in and you see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. All the old clothes can be thrown off and we're free to be everything that God created us to be.

And so we have this amazing new life now in Jesus. And then we also can look forward to the moment then in the future when it will all be finally brought together.
And so when you see Lazarus coming out of the grave, loosing his grave clothes, freed from sin. And when you see him then able to go and have a lovely meal with his family and friends and enjoy one another's company.
That is just a glimpse and a taste of what we will enjoy in heaven with Jesus and with each other. But all the kind of restriction and bondage that sin casts on our lives will be gone.
And all the loneliness and isolation and separation that death brings will be gone. And we'll just be having a brilliant time together.
[35:57] Where we can enjoy one another's company, get to know one another more and more. And see one another at our best in the way that Jesus has made us to be.

Without that anomaly, that blip of sin spoiling it. It's a reminder of the amazing future that we have in Jesus.
So we've asked our first three questions very, very quickly. Here's our last one. What does God require of us?
Well, the amazing thing is that the answer to that question is incredibly simple. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. 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 the key point is that we are not being asked to believe things.
[37:03] It's not saying believe in things. It's saying believe a person. Believe in me. Not believing stuff, but believing him.

We believe in a person. And that's where everything comes together so perfectly. The absolute of the universe is a person, as we've been trying to say.
And all he requires us to do is to trust him. To believe him. And that's the astounding truth of the gospel.
Jesus is saying, I am the resurrection and the life. I am the absolute of the universe. I am the source from the very beginning. I am the end point at the very end.
I am the ground of everything. I am the foundational meta reality. And yet you are precious to me.
[38:04] Your life matters to me. And I have come to save you from death. In fact, 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 now. And though you may get ill. And though you will die. Yet you will live. And you will never, ever die. And forever I will delight in you.
And you can delight in being with me. And being with all your brothers and sisters. As we enjoy amazing togetherness. And Jesus is saying, for that to happen.
I will do everything. Absolutely everything. You don't have to bring me anything. You don't have to impress me.
You don't have to work your way up to it. You don't have to earn it. You don't have to do anything. Just trust me. And this is where we see the incredible truth.
[39:06] Of hearing the gospel message on a Sunday morning. The absolute of the universe. Jesus Christ is saying to you. I want you with me.

Please just trust me. He is holding out his hand to you. To give you life. And I hope that this is reminding us that if we are surrounded by people, colleagues, friends, even family, who think that the absolute of the universe is death.
That nothing lies behind it. Nothing lies ahead of it. And this is just a blip. I hope that we stop thinking like that. And to me, it makes far more sense that life comes from life.
And that death is the anomaly. I hope we see that life is what lies at the heart of the universe. And I hope you can see that Jesus has come to give you that life.
And he's done it because he loves you. Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live.
[40:25] And everyone who believes in me shall never die. But perhaps the most important question of it all is this one. Do you believe this?

Amen. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you so much that you have come to give us life.

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We thank you so much for the way in which you dealt with Mary and Martha and with Lazarus. So that just as you said, it would be for our benefit to see why you've come and to see what you are doing.
And we bow before you as the resurrection and the life, the source of all reality, and our saviour and the one in whom we find hope and life and joy.
And we pray that every one of us, every single one of us would see how precious we are to you. And that you would be so precious to us.
[41:32] And please build up in us an ever greater sense of togetherness. So that as everybody in the world around us looks on us as a church, that they would see real life.

Real, joyful, wonderful, loving life. Please may that be true of us all in everything that we do. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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