

John 12:2

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[0 : 00] We turn again in God's Word to John's Gospel, chapter 12. John's Gospel, chapter 12. And we're going to read it, verse 2.

And just before I do read the text for this morning, it's good to remind ourselves of all the Lord's promises, and he promises to help us to overcome all obstacles.

You're feeling a bit cold down there. I'm feeling a bit cold up here, but I found my scarf, and it's on. And I suppose it's okay for me, because I can generate heat by waving my arms around.

But pray, pray that the Lord will help every one of us to concentrate on His Word, to hear His voice, and to know His blessing.

Verse 2, John chapter 12. Here, a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at table with him.

[1 : 11] Lazarus was one of those seated at the table with Jesus. It sounds so matter-of-fact, so ordinary a statement.

One person sitting there among lots of other invited guests at a dinner party, and probably, given the kind of culture in which they lived, quite a few uninvited hangers-on as well.

But let's use our imagination a little. Yes, one man mentioned, just in passing, but this was a dead man walking, a dead man who had come alive.

And you can just imagine if it had happened today, that the roads and the paths to Bethany would be jam-packed with paparazzi, all eager to get the best photo for their sensational newspapers the next day.

And there would be the reporters sticking their microphones under Lazarus' nose and quizzing him in all kinds of ways. Lazarus, Lazarus, were you really dead?

[2 : 37] What was it like to be dead? In that tomb, they say you were there four days. What happened? What did you feel?

How was it being dead in the tomb? And then, so they say, that you, a dead man, came alive. And I suppose it would certainly happen today that there were the usual conspiracy theories floating around.

It's just over 50 years since President Kennedy was assassinated. And to this very day, there are conspiracy theories all the time.

Could it have been just that one man, Lee Oswald? Did he have companions, fellow assassins? And why did that other man kill him?

Was he put up to it? Were there plots? And we know that that's happening all the time. And it would doubtless have happened there as well. Was he really dead?

[3 : 44] Or was it a put-up job? Was it these followers of his wanting to bring him into the limelight? Or was it maybe even the authorities desperate to get rid of him?

They thought up some fancy way of managing to get him in such a way that they could then arrest him. And so these conspiracy theories were probably floating around all the time.

And there was the first century equivalent of the kind of crush of reporters and photographers that there would have been today.

We see, for example, we didn't actually read down to verse 19, but at verse 17 of chapter 12, we're told that the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb, they continued to spread the word.

The crowd, the word being spread. Many people went out to meet him. And the Pharisees then said to each other, the whole world has gone after him.

[4 : 51] Well, that's how it was then. But you and I, we're privileged today, in peace and quiet, to investigate this whole matter and to be able to consider the facts that are true, that have been inspired by the Holy Spirit.

But he has recorded all we need to know. He hasn't told us lots of these things that reporters then and reporters today would have liked to know. But he's told us everything that you and I need to know for our benefit, for our spiritual welfare, for our encouragement, for our challenge.

And this morning I'd like to focus on Lazarus. Lazarus will obviously have to refer briefly to the miracle itself, but to focus on Lazarus after the miracle's taking place.

Lazarus sitting at that dinner table that day. What does he tell us? In what ways does he challenge us? How does he call us to be like him, a true follower of the Lord Jesus?

The first thing that I'd say about him that day was that he was a source of wonder. Very obviously so. He was a source of wonder.

[6 : 19] And as he was being bombarded with questions, it must have happened that way, all these questions, I rather fancy that a point could have come in Lazarus constantly being asked, what was it like, what were you doing, and so on and so forth, that Lazarus must have felt a bit like the blind man who two chapters before, his experience has been recorded for us.

He was blind from birth. And you remember when Jesus healed him, it caused a tremendous sensation, and the Pharisees, the scribes, the chief priests, and so on, they called him into their council, and they interrogated him.

Was it really you? Were you really, well, they knew he was blind from birth, but are you the fellow who used to beg there? What happened? And so on and so forth.

And when he wasn't able to answer all their questions, they kicked him out, but then they called in his parents, and his parents were interrogated. And his parents, they weren't willing to respond to all these interrogations.

Well, we don't know anything they said. He's of age. Ask him himself. And so off they went, and they haul in the poor blind man again. More quizzing, more interrogation, and it's very striking.

[7 : 46] I'm sure it's the last thing that these folks expected to hear from the blind man when he says to them, look, why are you asking me all these questions? Do you want to be his disciples as well?

No wonder at that, that they kicked him out again, but not before he said this. I can't answer all your questions, but one thing I know, whereas I was blind, now I see.

And Lazarus could well have put an end to all the questioning that he must have faced with similar words. One thing I know, I was dead, but now I'm alive.

I was helpless. I was there in the tomb. I knew nothing, nothing at all. I can't answer all your questions.

But, I don't know how. I don't know why me, amongst all the thousands in the Bethany Cemetery over there, but this I know.

[9 : 02] I heard a voice deep down within my soul, and that voice said, Lazarus, come out.

come out. I was bound. I was dead. I couldn't do it. But I did.

I came out because I heard the voice of Jesus Christ, the powerful voice, the life-giving voice.

He spoke, a mystery of mysteries. Don't ask me how, but I came out alive. And no doubt, he may well have said this to them, I don't know, but he would have explained how he came out of the darkness of the tomb, and he was dazzled, dazzled by the light around him.

He sees all the crowds, some faces he recognized, many others he didn't. What are they all doing there? He saw himself so funnily dressed, these strange shrouds that I have around me.

[10 : 19] And then he saw the face of Jesus. He didn't just hear his voice, he saw his face, and straight away he knew him.

He knew that he had believed in him. He knew that this Jesus loved him, and that he owed everything to him, everything. Lazarus, a source of wonder.

But that was then, wasn't it? These things, they don't happen today, do they? Well, of course, Almighty God, he could raise the millions from the dead with a word, today as then, and he will do in that great final resurrection day.

But what God is doing, and that's so clear in this Gospel of John, through these, what are sometimes called signs and wonders, he is pointing pointing towards his Son, the Messiah, the one prophesied, the one who was to come as King and as Savior, as Lord and as God, not only of Israel, but of all throughout the world who would believe in him.

And in John's Gospel, isn't it the case that the miracles are so carefully selected? John, guided by the Spirit, has selected out of the many, he himself says at the end of his book, Jesus did many, many, many more signs and miracles than those recorded in this book.

[12 : 01] But there are these seven, not counting the greatest, of course, the resurrection of Jesus, and the one that he added later, again inspired by the Spirit in chapter 21, which is a kind of appendix to the book, the miraculous draft of fishes.

But here's this, this careful selection. And he says very definitely, these miracles, they were signs. And in chapter 2, the changing of the water into wine, this first miracle says the authorized version, Jesus did, the NIV that we're reading says this, beginning of signs, Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and his disciples believed on him.

And so the signs were pointing to Jesus. But parallel with that, alongside it, they were pointing to him, who he was, that people might believe in him.

But they were also speaking of spiritual realities that were shown forth by the physical happenings, by the miracles themselves.

Water, wine, provided for the people's thirst. And Jesus goes on to say later on that whoever drinks of him will never thirst.

[13 : 22] And with the blind man, here again, it's the healing of physical blindness. But Jesus goes on to speak, and you find the debate at the end of chapter 9 with the unbelieving religious leaders about another blindness.

And he says to them, you're blind. They say, blind? We're not blind? Yes, you are. You're blind in a deeper way. And because you are willfully blind in your souls, you will not believe the signs that are there before you, signs coming from heaven.

Your guilt remains. So, all along, these miracles, these signs, they're intended to speak to us of Jesus Christ, but also of our own condition.

And that's why this bringing of Lazarus from the dead, the real meaning behind it of another death and another life is picked up by, for example, the Apostle Paul.

He writes to the Ephesians, chapter 2, and he says, you were dead in your trespasses and sins. He writes to the Colossians in chapter 2 of that epistle, and he says, you were dead.

[14 : 39] Dead in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature. You were dead. And that, of course, brings us all the way back, not only from when Paul wrote, not only from when Lazarus was raised from the dead, but right back to the beginning, to the creation, there in Eden, when God said to our first parents, if you disobey, if you eat of the fruit of this forbidden tree, you will surely die.

They disobeyed. They died. Did they? They went on to have other children. We're told that in those patriarchal times, Adam lived 900 years.

But yes, they did die. They died physically, eventually, but they died in their souls. The way into the presence of God was barred. There was the angel with a flaming sword.

They couldn't enter ever again into the presence of God unless God himself in mercy and grace opened up a new way for them. And so, this whole story where Lazarus is a source of wonder is one that points you and me to our spiritual death by nature, unless we have been quickened into newness of life through Jesus Christ.

It speaks to us of a greater miracle of how God not only raises a body from the dead, but raises a soul out of the darkness of spiritual death.

[16 : 20] And the words of John Newton, though he doesn't use the word dead, but he could very well have done it, I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see, we could well add, was dead, but now I live.

Some of you maybe know a famous poem by John Macefield, the then poet laureate, called The Everlasting Mercy. It tells about a poacher called Saul, a pretty rough character, lived a life of sin, but God met him, and Macefield very movingly describes the progress of his conversion, and how that morning when he knew God's grace in Jesus Christ, he sang, Oh glory of the lighted mind, how dead I was, how dumb, how blind.

That's what Jesus does. Not just then, but today. But another thing we notice about Lazarus sitting at that table that day is that, as well as being a source of wonder, he is a part of the fellowship.

He's a part of the fellowship. He's there at a table, and there's a group of people, and who are they? Well, they're the disciples, those who have left all to follow Jesus.

Yes, they made many mistakes. Yes, there was the one who denied. Yes, there was the one who doubted. Yes, there were those who forsook him and fled, but they loved him, and they had given up all to follow him.

[18 : 04] They were his people, and there alongside them were his own sisters, Mary and Martha, who'd entered into a deeper than ever understanding of Jesus when he, Lazarus, had died.

Yes, they believed in an ultimate resurrection, but Jesus says to them, I am now, today, the resurrection and the life. If you believe in me, you'll never die, and Lazarus knew that, and here he was with those who loved Jesus, who were following Jesus.

They were the people of God, and they were met together in worship and in fellowship. Yes, at a mealtime. God uses mealtimes, too, for the blessing of his people, but there they were.

They were listening to Jesus, learning from his teaching. They were being encouraged by Jesus. They were learning to grow in their new life as the followers of Jesus, the Savior and Messiah.

And Lazarus is there. He knows that's his place. He's to be part of the fellowship. Yes, he was unique. There was nobody else like him in one sense, but that was not for him, a reason for boasting, for glorying, what he knew that others didn't know.

[19 : 24] It wasn't a case of isolating himself on some kind of pedestal, the man who had been raised from the dead in that wonderful way. Humbly, Lazarus joined with the body of Christ.

He knew that that was vital. He'd never yet read the words that were to be included in Scripture later on.

We have them in the letter to the Hebrews. Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is. It wouldn't have entered his mind.

It wouldn't have crossed his mind to be a solitary believer because of his special condition. He knew that he had to be part of the people of God, and so do you.

And so do I. We must be with the worshipping people of God. We cannot, cannot ever say, sadly, you've probably come across them, and so have I.

[20 : 22] Sometimes fine Christian people, and somehow or other they say, well, I love Jesus, and I follow Jesus, but I've no time for the church. They may have been hurt by the church.

They may have suffered at the hands of Christians, sadly. We all have to examine ourselves, but never, ever, ever, Lazarus would shout out to us, never, ever, fail to be part of the worshipping and serving and witnessing body of Christ.

Rejoice with them, sorrow with them, pray with them. Lazarus, a part of the fellowship. A third thing about Lazarus is that he was a focus for opposition, a focus for opposition.

Now, you find that in various references in the passage we read, chapter 11, verse 45, verses 45 to 49.

It talks about many following Jesus, believing in him, but some went to the Pharisees, told them what Jesus had done. They called their meeting and they said, we can't allow this to happen.

[21 : 40] And even more significantly, you have in chapter 12 at verse 10 these very sinister words.

So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well. For an account of him, many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

Lazarus became a focus of the opposition of the enemies of God. But what had poor Lazarus done? Had he raised the flag of revolution in the streets of Jerusalem?

Had he spoken out in the temple against the authorities? Had he cashed in on his own celebrity? No, none of these things.

All he'd done was listen to Jesus, believe in Jesus, love Jesus, and embark on a life like that of Jesus, a life of love, a life of peace, a life of goodwill to all around him.

[22 : 57] But the Pharisees, they hated Jesus. The kinder he was, the more they hated him. You know some of the reasons, the envy and so on.

They hated me, it was prophesied of Jesus, without a cause. And he himself said, if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

And that is what happened to Lazarus. Because of his connection to Jesus, he was hated, he was persecuted, he was harried.

We don't know the end of the story, but perhaps like many of Jesus' faithful followers, he suffered, perhaps paid with his own life, we don't know.

there's an incident several hundred years before Lazarus was raised from the dead, where this whole concept of hating Jesus or God's followers because they hate God comes very clearly.

[24 : 09] The wicked king Ahab in Israel, he was going out to battle against the Syrians. He called for cooperation from the good and godly king Jehoshaphat, who shouldn't have gone, but he did.

Ahab calls his prophets, prophets who are in his pocket, prophets of Baal, and they all say, yes, yes, yes, yes, you go out and you'll win a great victory. Jehoshaphat, man of God, says, is there no prophet of the Lord that we can call?

And here's the thing, Ahab says, yes, yes, there is one, but I hate him. This was Micaiah, who was sitting in a jail in chains because he spoke the truth of God, and the ruler of Israel hated God and his law and his constraints.

And what was true of Micaiah, what became true of Lazarus, well, it's true still, isn't it? We've prayed this morning for persecuted Christians. We think of Nigeria, Boko Haram, murdering without pity.

We think of Syria, we think of Iraq, we think of our brothers and sisters in North Korea, and the list can go on and on and on. And then there comes a word to us, we don't suffer in that way, but shall we ever shrink from, yes, a less violent, but an all real sometimes in our society rejection of who we are and what we stand for, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 59] What a challenge Lazarus gives us today. And then lastly, we've seen Lazarus as a source of wonder, as a part of the fellowship, as a focus for opposition.

And Lazarus too, as he sits that day at that table with Jesus and the others. He is a spur to evangelism. A spur to evangelism.

Again, let me read chapter 11, verse 45. Therefore, many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

You have the same kind of thing. In other parts, you've got it in chapter 12, verses 9 and 10, and again, verses 17 and 18.

For example, verse 17, the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word.

[27 : 04] You see, he's become a spur to others to tell yet others the good news of Jesus. I've no doubt that Lazarus himself evangelized.

People would ask him what happened. He said, Jesus gave me life, and he would tell them of Jesus. But not everyone had the chance to speak to Lazarus.

You can imagine it. Word goes around all the villages and not everyone. Transport wasn't so easy in those days. Not everyone could get to where Lazarus was, and yet there were many who believed.

They heard what Jesus had done. They heard what had happened to this man Lazarus, and so they too became followers of Jesus. But there's not only the personal evangelism that Lazarus no doubt engaged in, but there is, as I've just noted, what happened right around that whole area.

Many others, because of Lazarus believed and spread the word. And that's true, as you read the scriptures, of all Jesus' miracles, which were signs.

[28 : 17] And it should be true of the greatest miracle of all in the lives of men and women, and that is new life in Christ. You turn from sin by God's grace, and you receive the gift of eternal life.

You have eternal life. What greater miracle than that. And as that happens, then those who are thus changed become a focus, yes, for opposition, but also they become a spur for evangelism.

And you and I should pray in all our congregations for this kind of thing to happen, for men and women to be converted. Yes, there are many ways to be converted, and they're all wonderful, all part of God's work, sometimes very gently over a long period.

But by the grace of God, there are times that he does what happened with Lazarus. Suddenly, miraculously, in a most dramatic way, someone who is bound by sins of many a kind is brought into new life, and it's a testimony.

It causes people to sit up and notice, and that's a blessing to the church. Just the other day, I was speaking on the phone to a minister, a free church minister, in one of our smaller congregations, and I asked him how things were going, and he told me that they were encouraged, they'd been able to make contact with quite a few alcoholics and drug addicts in the part of the town where their church is situated.

[29 : 54] Indeed, they began what they call a road to recovery group. And I said, well, you're a small congregation, can you cope with that? Have you got the people to help?

Well, he said a wonderful thing. Just a few months ago, a man started coming to church. He was an alcoholic, had been most of his life.

Everyone knew him as an alcoholic, somebody who could never, ever change. But he came to our church, and he heard the word, and he was converted.

His chains fell off, and now he's free. There's no complacency. Of course, Satan will attack him and try to get him to relapse. But his testimony, this minister told me, has been a huge blessing to the congregation.

And he brings along all his old mates, and God is at work among us. When someone like Lazarus is brought from death to life, and in our congregations, it can be the greatest of all spurs to effective evangelism.

[31 : 07] Let me close by reminding ourselves of something about Lazarus that is not mentioned here, but it's obviously true.

Lazarus died. He was miraculously raised to life. But Lazarus died again. Well, he must have done, like everybody else.

The day came when the funeral procession carried the corpse of Lazarus back to the cemetery of Bethany.

He died again, and Lazarus knew that. As he sat at table that day, he knew very well that he had been physically raised, but that he would physically die.

His soul would not die because it was safe in the keeping of Jesus, his Savior and Redeemer. And he knew that he needed to be ready, ready for what would await him.

[32 : 17] just a personal note. I hope this is challenging to all of us. A few months ago, Catherine, my wife, and I decided that given that our children, none of them live in or near Edinburgh or where we live, it would be good to make some preparations, so we got one of these prepaid funeral arrangements, and we had to buy our lot, our lair, in a local cemetery.

And eventually, through the post, came the title deed to this particular piece of real estate, the only real estate I've ever owned.

And we opened it up, and there it was. it said, Craig Miller Castle Park Cemetery, Section C, Grave 634.

Now, of course, we have both, by God's grace, for over 60 years been followers of the Lord Jesus. So, we know that we must be prepared for death when it comes, but somehow or other, looking at it, it just spoke to you so powerfully.

The words of Scripture, it is appointed unto men once to die, and after death, the judgment. We made some kind of preparation, but have you this morning made the main, absolutely vital preparation, which is that of repentance and of faith, trusting in Jesus as the one who took away and would take for you the sting of death away with the gift of eternal life.

[34 : 30] God grant that we would all know it and rejoice in it. let us pray. Our God and Father, we thank you that the Lord Jesus went about doing good and went about performing those great signs, pointing to his own Messiahship, and reminding men and women of deeper, more fundamental truths that so many had forgotten so easily.

that they and we have been made in the image of God and that we are responsible to the God who made us.

Grant, O God, that the spiritual equivalent of what happened that day to Lazarus would be true, wonderfully true, for every one of us.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Let us close our service singing in Psalm 16, Psalm 16 on page 17.

We sing from verse 8 to the tune Buser. Before me constantly I set the Lord alone.

[35 : 56] and then there is that great verse 10 speaks primarily of the Lord Jesus, his resurrection, but it's also relevant for us.

For you will not allow my soul in death to stay. Let us praise God. Praise God. Praise God. God to be Christ said the Lord alone because he is at my return I thought he overthrown.

my heart is glad my song with joy will sing my body too will rest in hope on liberty for you will not allow my soul in death to stay nor will you leave your holy one to see the tombs decay you have made long to me the path life the grace of the

Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always amen