

Death to Life

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.

³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days."

⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."

⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."

⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him,

⁴⁶ but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

John 11:38-46

Between Two Worlds

Our present existence is one of great tension. This tension creates conflict. It is a conflict between two worlds, two ages, two mindsets, two approaches, two

ideals: Good and evil, heaven and hell, truth and falsehood, right and wrong, God and Satan.

The present age is this world. It is a world of flesh and bone, wood and stone, bread and wine, and war and peace, hate and love, tearing and sowing, keeping and casting away, seeking and losing, embrace and leaving, gathering and scattering, mourning and dancing, weeping and laughing, building and tearing down, wounding and healing, living and dying. It holds out with one hand glimpses of something beyond itself, but then quickly snatches it away with the other, leaving souls in a kind of hopeless longing or yearning despair.

The age to come is the next world. It is both like the present age and not like it. All these things exist or will exist, but will be separated from one another: Joy in one corner, weeping and gnashing of teeth in the other. One side is eternal life. It knows no war, no hate, no loss, no mourning, no wounding, no dying. The other is eternal death. It has no peace, no love, no gain, no comfort, only sorrow, and toil, and misery, and pain, and endless suffering.

The conflict is real and it is powerful. Opposites exist side by side. This conflict presents us all with a

temptation. Will we live with the tension or seek to escape from it? God has left us in this world while commanding us not to be like it. He has given us duties to carry out here, while expecting us not to turn those duties into idols. This place is real and the joys and sorrows of it should never be trivialized. But it is not our home, so its joys should not consume us and its sorrows should not overwhelm us.

The most basic joy in this age is life. What a glory it is, a gift from God, a treasure to hold and cherish, to ponder and enjoy each and every day it is granted. Each of you here has been given this gift of God today. You are alive. Not all life is of the same quality or quantity. Yet all life is precious. And it is certainly better to be alive than to be dead. *The living, the living, he thanks the LORD; the father makes known to the children his faithfulness (Isa 38:18-19).*

Conversely, the most basic sorrow in this life is death. It is not better to be dead than to be alive. *“In death there is no remembrance of you” (Ps 6:5). God does not work wonders for the dead (Ps 88:10). Those who go down to the pit do not hope for God’s faithfulness (Isa 38:18). The dead do not praise the Lord (Ps 115:17).*

Some of you have just now tried to escape our tension. “It *is* better to be dead than to be alive,” you proclaim. But you speak of a different kind of life than I. You have moved too quickly, perhaps not wanting to look our problem squarely in the eyes. It *is* better to be physically *alive* than to be physically dead. But you know a secret that most cannot understand, and this is why you move ahead so quickly. And perhaps there are some here today that do not yet know this secret either, so you especially should listen to discover what it is.

A Christian can say such a thing because they have a hope beyond the grave, to a second life, a life that will last forever, to that hope and comfort and joy that exists in the fullness of God’s loving presence in Christ on the other side in the age to come. You have seen beyond death to eternal life. But how does a person come to such knowledge?

Two Women’s Dead Sons

Consider the story of an unnamed woman living 3,000 years ago in Israel (2 Kgs 4:8-37). This woman had great wealth. She was a God-fearing woman, and she used to house and feed the great prophet Elisha whenever he passed by her town. The prophet, wanting to do

something to repay her kindness, discovered that the woman had an old husband and was childless. He told her that a year from now she would give birth to a son. She did not believe him, but the woman conceived and she bore a son as the prophet had said. This woman knew the joy of life in a miraculous way and so it was a great treasure to her.

One day, when the boy grew, he was out working the field with her father, when suddenly, his head began to explode. “Oh, my head, my head!” he screamed. They carried him to his mother, and the child sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. Now, the woman had made a special room with the hole in the roof so that Elisha could come and go as he pleased. She lay her son on his bed and went out. Calling to her husband in great distress she said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” She found Elisha at Mount Carmel. Surprised, his servant said, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman.” He quickly inquired as to the nature of her business. She fell upon his feet and he saw that she was in bitter distress, though God had not revealed to her why.

Confused, he let her speak. “Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, ‘Do not deceive me?’” At once, the prophet sent his servant Gehazi on ahead, and commanded him to take his staff and lay it on the face of the child. Gehazi obeyed his master, but there was no sound or sign of life. He went out to meet Elisha, who was just now arriving. “The child has not awakened.” Elisha came into the house and saw the child lying dead on his bed.

He and his servant went into the boy, shut the door, and prayed to the LORD. He then lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. Elisha got up, walked back and forth in the house, and then stretched himself upon him again. This time the child sneezed seven times, and opened his eyes.

He called for the Shunammite woman who came in. And he said, “Pick up your son.” She fell at his feet, bowing to the ground. Then she picked up her son and went out. Here, the story ends. This story clearly shows that there is life after death, for it tells us of resurrection. Yet, the woman’s response is curious. She bowed to the

man of God, picked up her son, and left. That's it. Her child had been raised from the dead, and that's the best she can do? Maybe she felt that for all of her kindness, this was the least Elisha could do? Maybe she was too overwhelmed to speak? We just don't know. What we do know is that a boy was raised from the dead, but there is no hint of anything more to her response than this. The boy would die again, and the pit would claim its own once more.

Consider the story of another unnamed woman living just a few years earlier in the Gentile land of Sidon (1 Kgs 17:9-24). God spoke to Elisha's predecessor, Elijah the Tishbite and told him to go to the village of Zarephath. There he would find a widow who would feed him. He arrived and found the widow gathering sticks. He called to her, "Bring me a little water that I may drink, and a morsel of bread that I may eat."

This woman spoke the name of God and said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, and only a little flour in a jar. I am gathering sticks to prepare it for my son that we may eat it and die." For, there was no rain on the land, because Elijah had prayed that there be no rain for three years. Elijah said, "Do not fear; go

and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake and bring it to me, then go and make yourself something, for the LORD has said that your jar of flour shall not be spent, and your jug of oil shall not run empty until the day the LORD sends rain upon the earth.”

She went and did as Elijah had said, and they ate together for many days. Many days later, the boy became ill. Soon, the woman’s son also died. So she said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!” She was not an Israelite, and her superstition got the better of her.

He said to her, “Give me your son.” So Elijah took him from her arms and carried him into the upper chamber and laid him on his own bed. He cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?” Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let the child’s life come into him again.” And the LORD listen to the voice of Elijah. And the boy revived. Elijah took the child and brought him down to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.” And the woman said to

Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that word of the LORD in your mouth is truth.”

It is the same basic story with the same basic outcome. A grieving woman’s son is brought back from the dead. Both show a resurrection, that there is life after death. This woman’s reaction is a little different. She professes a kind of mental ascent to the truth of Elijah’s words and the power of his God. Does she express faith in Elijah’s God? We are not told. But I think we can gather that in neither story, though there is a resurrection, the hope of these women is still basically focused on the present evil age. Their sons are brought back to life now. But what about the age to come?

A Valley of Dry Bones

There is yet a third story I would like to tell you now. It is found in yet another prophet whose name begins with “E.” This one concerns the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel lived in the time of the exile, when Israel found itself in captivity to Babylon. Ezekiel lived in Babylon, but he was told by the LORD that a great and mighty feat would occur: God would return his people back to their land to resettle it and rebuild the temple. But here is where Ezekiel’s ideas begin to diverge from those of the

previous two stories. Whereas the other stories are focused completely on the physical, on this present age, Ezekiel begins to get a sense of the age to come. The temple he speaks of is a better temple, a temple fulfilled not in some future millennial reign, but in the present millennial reign of Jesus Christ and his church, who are the stones of this temple.

This spiritual language was told to him this way, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came ... I will vindicate the holiness of my great name ... and the nations will know that I am the LORD ... when through you I will vindicate my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to

walk in my statues and be careful to obey my rules” (**Ezek 36:22-27**).

To make this reality concrete to him, the LORD brought Ezekiel by the Spirit to the middle of a valley (**Ezek 37:1-14**). This valley was full of bones. It was a valley of death; an army of corpses. The LORD led the prophet around the valley so that he saw that the bones were very dry. Then he spoke to the prophet, “Son of man, can these bones live?” He answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” So the LORD said, “Prophecy/preach to the bones. Say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. You shall live and know that I am the LORD.’”

So Ezekiel preached to the bones as he was commanded, and suddenly there was a sound, a rattling, and behold, the bones came together, bone to its bone. Sinews covered the bones, and flesh covered the sinews, and skin came upon them all. But there was no breath in them. So the LORD said to the prophet, “Prophecy to the breath and say to it, “Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”

So the prophet preached as he was commanded, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, and exceedingly great army. And the LORD Said, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.” Therefore preach to them and say, “The LORD God says I will open your graves and raise you from your grave, O my people. I will bring you into the land of Israel. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.”

The story is obviously a figure. There was not physical valley with physical bones that became a physical army. God says as much when he explains that this refers to Israel. But to what Israel? What is the story teaching? Is it merely that a physical people will return to a physical land and that is the end of it? What is the point of the Spirit coming and making them alive? Why the discussion about idols and the heart? This refers to spiritual resurrection, eternal life. But it does so by inviting us to consider that physical resurrection is a picture of spiritual resurrection. The one does not lead to the other, of course, but the one teaches the other and necessarily points to it. If a soul can be brought back from

the dead, then that soul went somewhere to be brought back from. It did not cease to exist only to be brought back into existence, but rather went to another place and was brought back to this one.

The problem is, throughout the age, people have been entire too fixed upon the physical. They stare at the sign, but don't bother to think about what it is pointing to. This is precisely what must not be allowed to happen. The sign has its own reality, but so does the greater reality to which it points. Enter now a fourth story, this one found in the NT, in John 11.

The Dead Friend Whom Jesus Loved

We looked last time at the death of Lazarus. What we saw was exactly this problem. The disciples, Thomas, Mary, Martha, and the Jews were all fixated on the physical death of Lazarus. This is, of course, perfectly understandable and also acceptable, under normal circumstances. But this was not a normal circumstance.

The Lord Jesus had told several people in different ways that he planned on going to Bethany in order to raise Lazarus from the dead. He wasn't exactly that blunt about it, but given all that he had been doing for the past three years as he traveled around healing and feeding and

preaching, his mysterious language should certainly have been compensable. When he says for example, “This illness does not lead in to death” (John 11:4), once they saw that Lazarus was dead, they should have taken his next teachings, “It is for the glory of God” (11:5), “I go to awaken him” (11:11), “Your brother will rise again” (11:23), and “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), at the very least they should have believed in Lazarus’ physical resurrection.

They didn’t. Because they didn’t believe it, they most certainly could not believe the greater truth hidden in that sign. If you do not see the sign, how on earth can you understand what it signifies? What is that truth? It is a truth hidden in the stories of Elijah and Elisha but revealed in Ezekiel and especially our Lord who in this story. It is a truth that people may have life after death, a kind of life that lasts forever. What Jesus is about to do proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is such a thing as eternal life, for that is why he performs the miracle. As he told Martha, “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” (11:25-26).

Let us look at how this miracle occurs. Jesus is deeply moved again (11:38). As we saw last week, this refers to his anger regarding the unbelief of even his close friends about the words he has spoken. Yet, rather than take it out of them by, say, blasting them to hell for eternity, the Lord takes pity on them. He comes to the tomb of Lazarus, a cave with a stone set in front of it, as was the custom in such burials.

He commands Martha to take away the stone (39). He replied, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” Martha now demonstrates that her belief (see vs. 27) isn’t really very deep at all. The one person in the story you think might actually get it really doesn’t have much of a clue. A comment on the “four days” is appropriate here. Jesus’ delay of two days allows Lazarus to be dead for four days before he is raised. Jesus delayed on purpose and tells Martha now that it was for the glory of God that he did so (11:40). What is significant about being dead for four days? If you recall, neither of the other two stories had a person dead this long. The point is that Jesus wanted Lazarus to stink, so that everyone would know that this could not be mistaken for anything other than a resurrection.

Jesus said that what was necessary was belief. Jesus had asked her if she believed, and she responded with a confused “yes.” Nevertheless, **it was true belief**, not false belief, even if it was a weak belief, a poor belief, and a shallow belief. This is demonstrated by her action; **they took away the stone (41)**. Was this not a sign of belief? It was indeed, for if she had not truly believed, she would have laughed him out of town rather than opening the grave.

At this point, the Lord Jesus offers a prayer, much the same way that Elijah and Elisha both prayed prior to the great resurrections the LORD performed through them (see **2 Kgs 4:33; 1 Kgs 17:20-21**). Jesus says, **“Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me.”** But then he adds something very interesting in his prayer which is loud enough for people to hear, **“... but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41-42)**. Jesus, you see, was praying for the people’s sake, not because he had to somehow pray to get his Father to perform the miracle. In fact, it is clear that it had already been determined that the miracle would take place. The significance here is that Jesus merely **has**

to thank the Father for hearing him. He doesn't ask for anything. And yet, it is surely true that Jesus had already prayed and Father and Son had together determined to perform this miracle, even before Lazarus had died, in order that the Son might be glorified.

It is curious that in the **Elisha** story, there is no glory really given to anyone. In the **Elijah** story, there is some glory given, for the woman acknowledges that Elijah speaks the truth. But neither Elisha nor Elijah is glorified. It is different with Jesus. The Father answers the Son so that might glorify the Son, so that people might believe in Him to their own eternal well being. This prayer helps you see this showing you the inseparable connection between the Father and Son and the deity of both. And yet, Jesus offers this prayer not to glorify himself, but that the Father might glorify him and that people might believe that he was sent by the Father.

Resurrection through the Word

After offering this prayer of thanks, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “**Lazarus, come out**” (**John 11:43**). Some have commented that if Jesus had not **called Lazarus by name**, all the people in all the tombs would have come to life together. This may very well be the case. What you

should notice here is that Jesus is speaking to Lazarus, yet at the moment he begins speaking, Lazarus is somewhere else. The word brings Lazarus back to his body. This demonstrates what we have already seen. When a person dies, **they go someplace else**, at least their soul does. In terms used earlier, it goes to the “age to come” (Sheol, heaven/hades, etc). So, for Jesus to call Lazarus is for him to tell Lazarus to come back to his body. It is like the Rich Man telling Abraham to send Lazarus back to life so that he might tell his family not to come to this place of torment.

Notice also that **Jesus merely speaks the word**. What did **Elisha** do? He laid upon the boy. What did **Elijah** do? He laid upon the boy. There is no physical contact at all in this case. Rather, Lazarus and Jesus are separated by a great distance. It is the power of the word that brought Lazarus to life. This is much like what we see in the Ezekiel story. **“Son of man, preach to the bones.”** When the prophet preached, the bones came to life. This is an extremely significant point that people do not understand or believe and the implications of this unbelief have been devastating.

Look around you today. **Look at churches. What is their trust in?** The Word? Hardly. You know what someone trusts by looking at what they do. Their trust is very clearly in music, in entertainment, in being very large, in being contemporary and cool, in being relevant. For 200 years this country has practiced a kind of religion that at the crucial point does not believe in the power of the word. Rather, **the word needs “help.”** It needs props. It needs additions: Altar calls, anxious benches, sentimental music playing in the background, emotional manipulations galore. Those were the old props. There are plenty of new one: Dances, Rock Concerts, Jumbotrons, wiccan Taize walks, Beach Boy Sunday, pastors bungee jumping out of the church (WalMart) rafters. You name it, nothing is off limits today. Why? Because this “helps” people come to Jesus.

Where has the Word gone? Oh, it isn't that we are missing *words*. We have lots of words. Our words are words of encouragement, words of happiness, words of self-help, words that say, “It's alright, everything is alright.” The church has become a factory of television slogans: **“Be all that you can be,” “You're worth it,”** and you can **“Have it your way.”** And Jesus is turned into **an**

army recruiter, and a L'OREAL hair salesmen, and the Burger King. There is a whole movement called “Word of Faith.” But this is not faith that is produced by the Word, it is words that are produced by faith. It is exactly backwards. And these words are not to bring people to life, but to make them healthy, happy, and rich. Name it and claim it.

These are all worldly means of doing business, and they work! That’s why people do them. But we don’t need what works, especially when we are talking about people understanding Jesus, understanding signs, and understanding eternal life. Because there is nothing we can do that will make it work. We need a miracle. We need a resurrection. We need the impossible.

So God asks the prophet the impossible. “Son of man, can these bones live?” The prophet wisely responds, “Ah LORD, you know” (i.e. “I’m sure you can make them live, but I have no idea how and I know I certainly can’t do it). And what does the LORD say? “Son of man, preach to the bones.” By faith the prophet preaches and the bones come to life. By faith the sons of man speaks the word to the Breath (The Spirit of God), and the Spirit of God causes the bones to come to life and live.

Jesus does the same thing, “Lazarus, come out.” Jesus preaches to the bones. And what happens? “The man who had died came out” (44). Did you hear that? Do you see it? No? Then come to life dead sinner and see. O Breath, cause the blind to see. O Spirit, let them know the glory of Christ. Let them see the power of Jesus and that he was sent by the Father. Cause them to believe in the power of God and not to trust in man’s inventions and clever ideas which come because he does not believe in your power. For trusting in man’s inventions has ruined the church and the only hope people have in this fallen world.

When Lazarus came out, his hands and feet were bound with linen strips, and his face was wrapped with a cloth (11:44). He was a walking mummy. But does this not instantly cause you to think on the greater miracle yet, that of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus? How was it greater? Lazarus came back to his perishable body, but Jesus was raised to his imperishable body of glory. And the cloths that wrapped him fell straight to the ground, as his body was transformed in the grave. Our Lord did not come out looking like a mummy, but rather he was

wrapped in the light of God in a body that was fit for heaven itself.

See also the compassion of our Lord in this story, “Unbind him, and let him go” (11:44). Christ uses these means to help his friends’ faith. The Lord spoke kindly to Lazarus his friend. He also allowed his loved ones to touch him and to unfetter him, to loose him from his stinking wrappings. What must this have been like for Mary and Martha? What must they have thought as they saw their brother come out of that grave still wrapped in his burial suit? What must they have thought as they uncovered his legs, his waist, his arms ... his face? Do you suppose they knew and understood the power of God’s word, the glory of the Son of God?

The text tells us, “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him” (11:45). Why did they believe? It was because God had opened their eyes to the truth. And yet, after all this, we learn the incredible fact, “But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done” (11:46). I tell you, this was not because they wanted to preach the gospel to the Pharisees, but because they saw their religion collapsing in front of their eyes. Their

solution would be to find a way to immediately kill Jesus and Lazarus (again). Otherwise, everyone in Israel would have believed in him, and the Jewish religion would have perished from the face of the earth.

The most basic joy in this age is life. Yet there is a greater joy in the age to come which is eternal life. Physical life points to eternal life. Yet, eternal life can be gained today. You need not wait until heaven to have it. This life is obtained through faith that Jesus is God and that he raises the dead to life by the power of his word and the newness of life he has already attained ahead of you in his resurrection from the dead.

The most basic sorrow in this life is death. Yet this death is also a sign. It is a sign that there is life after death, but that one must have eternal life before they die to see this life after death. Otherwise, there is only eternal death and judgment that await the sons of Adam. Lazarus had the remarkable experience of living twice. But he also died twice. Jesus died once, but lived twice, for in his death he conquered sin. And in his resurrection, he offers life to those that would drink and eat from him.

Therefore, come to life and live. Why would you perish in everlasting death?

