

## **John 11:1-44**

### **You Can't Keep a Good Man Down?**

#### **Unbreakable**

Today we need to take to heart the central words of this towering chapter: *"I am the resurrection and the life"*, Jesus declares. *"He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."* To which Jesus adds the question, *"Do you believe this?"* Many action movies have a very similar ending: a titanic ending between the hero and the arch-villain. The arch-villain appears to be dead. But suddenly and dramatically he revives and almost succeeds in killing the hero who somehow manages to survive this renewed threat and finish off the baddie once and for all. That's how it was in Terminator 1 with the seemingly invulnerable android. That's how it was again in Terminator 2 with the seemingly indestructible liquid metal android. That's how it is in the Die Hard movies and the Alien movies and the Lethal Weapon movies and the Jackie Chan movies. In reality the seeming invulnerability of the villain is an illusion - he does die. But also in reality the seeming vulnerability of the hero is an illusion - he or she always comes through in the end. This, of course, is pure fiction. Reality is different, isn't it? Or is it? *"I am the resurrection and the life"*, Jesus declares. *"He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."* To which Jesus adds the question, *"Do you believe this?"*

Do you believe that you possess a life that can never be taken away from you? A life with no used-by date? Do you believe that you are truly invulnerable? Remember the scene in Terminator 2 when the liquid metal android is sprayed with liquid nitrogen and then shot. The android is shattered into little pieces. Yet when the little pieces warm up they again coalesce and the liquid metal android is back in business again. But that's nothing compared to what Jesus promises. Your body can be completely atomised as when the Two Towers were destroyed on September 11. Bruce Willis may be "Unbreakable" but not even he can survive a nuclear explosion. As our accomplished operatic performers reminded us at the house party, when Humpty Dumpty falls off the wall, when an egg is completely smashed - all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again. But God does not need to have any of your body parts to put you back together again. All you need to know is that God knows you and God will never forget you, the individual you. If you belong to Jesus nothing can extinguish your life. You will receive a new resurrection body. You will live forever and nothing can prevent that from happening - you have Jesus' own word on that! It is mind-boggling to realise that in the final analysis you and I am invulnerable, unbreakable. God does not have to spin the world back the other way and reverse time to bring back Lois Lane or you and me to life.

#### **The Time of your Life**

When Martha lost her much loved brother, Lazarus, Jesus reassured her, *"Your brother will rise again"* (v23). Martha answered, *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"* (v24). We, like Martha, also believe in the resurrection of the dead. We, like Martha, expect to experience that glorious resurrection life on the day of judgment. However, to Martha's and everyone else's astonishment Lazarus is raised from the dead not on the last day but just a matter of minutes after Martha spoke with Jesus.

Many stress that Lazarus was not really raised from the dead but was only resuscitated. Obviously Lazarus did die at some future point. But talk of resuscitation misses the entire point. Martha says, "*I know [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*" How does Jesus answer her? "*I am the resurrection and the life.*" Get the point? You don't have to wait till the last day to experience resurrection life. Everyone who believes in Jesus experiences the very same resurrection life that everyone will experience on the last day. Why? Because Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life. If you believe in Jesus you already possess this life: "*He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die*" (v25b). Believe and live.

There is a bizarre comedy movie called *Death Becomes Her*. Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn both drink a miraculous elixir that gives them immortality. The trouble is that what they get is an everlasting death. Both women die shortly after taking this elixir. In the rest of the movie they are the walking dead. Their bodies no longer function properly. Damage can only be covered up not treated. They are incapable of having normal relationships. The Bible teaches us that all Christless people are already the walking dead. You may think you will only experience death on the day your body dies. The Bible teaches that without Christ you are already experiencing death. Similarly, once you join yourself to Christ by believing in him, that is, by placing your entire life in his hands, then you immediately possess the resurrection life of which Jesus is the sole source.

### **The God Who Permits Suffering and Death**

#### *The Reality of Divinely Ordained Suffering and Death*

Lazarus was not resuscitated. He was truly raised from the dead just as you and I were raised from the dead the moment we placed our faith in Christ. Jesus deliberately let Lazarus die to demonstrate he is indeed the source of death-defying life then and now.

But the idea that Jesus deliberately allowed Lazarus to die and caused such suffering for Lazarus' loved ones raises problems doesn't it? John tells us, "*Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days*" (v6). Why does Jesus fail to go to Lazarus and heal him? He deliberately stays away so that Lazarus would die. So when he eventually announces to his disciples that he is going back to Judea to wake up Lazarus he ends up bluntly telling his disciples, "*Lazarus is dead*" (v14). When Jesus arrives in Bethany where Lazarus had lived, his sister Mary reproaches Jesus, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (v21). She is, of course, quite correct. Jesus deliberately stayed away so that Lazarus would die.

Is Jesus cold and calculating in his actions? Is he manipulative? When shove comes to crunch, when the rubber hits the road, is Jesus really no better than Mao Tse Tung or Pol Pot or Stalin? At the end of the day does the end justify the means for Jesus?

Many people are bitter and hostile towards God, blaming him for tragedy they have experienced. They say they will never forgive God for letting a loved one die. When I was a teenager I sneered at people who said there was a God. I believed that the immense evil and suffering present in the world made a mockery of the idea of a

loving God. How can a loving, all-powerful God permit such atrocities to be committed?

*The Agony of the Love which Permits Suffering and Death*

Against his misunderstanding, John begins by highlighting Jesus' love for Lazarus and his sisters. Jesus is summoned by Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, with the words: "*Lord, the one you love is sick.*" Shortly after John emphasises: "*Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus*" (v5). We must not think that Jesus does not care how much suffering he put people through as long as he himself came out looking good or as long as it all served the cause. Jesus certainly cares about the agony his friends have suffered because he let Lazarus die: "*When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'*" (vv33-37). The closing question here is highly significant. Yes, Jesus could have kept Lazarus from dying. To some of those present this fact causes them to see Jesus' tears as crocodile tears. They regard him as manipulative, as a showman. They refuse to recognise the love of Jesus. The reality is that Jesus did let Lazarus die even though he greatly loved him.

Remember the wider context. The death and resurrection of Lazarus prepares us for the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. Soon God, his Father, would let Jesus die, let Jesus fall into the merciless hands of his vicious enemies, allow his son to suffer in far greater agony than that endured by Lazarus and his sisters. Are we to conclude from this that God does not really love Jesus? No, as Jesus goes to his death, he never moves from his conviction that his Father loves him.

Learn from the examples of Lazarus' sickness and death and the death of Jesus himself. The time must come, when sooner or later, God will let your loved ones and you yourself get sick and or die. Never allow yourself to believe that such suffering is evidence God does not love you. Jesus' disciples questioned his decision to go back to Judea because it was there that the Jewish people tried to stone him. At one level their fears are justified. Jesus is traveling towards his death. But Jesus encourages his disciples to follow him even into the place of suffering and death, saying: "*Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by the Light of the World. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.*" There may be someone here this morning who feels that he or she is stumbling around in the darkness of grief and suffering. This is the time to cling to Jesus, to "see by the Light of the World", that is, to see things from Jesus' perspective. Look at suffering and death through Jesus' eyes.

*Why a Loving God Permits Suffering and Death*

What is the purpose of Lazarus' fatal illness? Jesus explains, "*This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it*" (v4). Just as Jesus is about to perform the stupendous miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead, he declares, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*" (v40). What is the purpose of Lazarus' death and resurrection? The glorification of God that is inseparable from the glorification of Jesus himself.

But here is Jesus expecting that he himself will be made great by Lazarus' suffering and temporary death. Isn't that Machiavellian? Isn't this a clear case of Jesus exploiting and even creating suffering for his own selfish ends? Ah, but think again. Jesus says: *"This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."* In John's Gospel how is Jesus glorified? In what context is Jesus made great? That's right, through his own suffering and death on the cross. Lazarus' sickness does not end in death but in resurrection. And this all occurs so that Jesus will be made great, that is, so that Jesus himself might suffer and die.

When you suffer and die as a Christian your suffering and death results in the glorification of God. What Jesus said about Lazarus applies to every true Christian: *"This sickness will not end in death."* The time will come, unless Jesus returns beforehand, when all of us will have a fatal disease, accident or attack. We will die. But it will not end there. The resurrection of Lazarus and of Jesus remind us that we too will be raised to life. Jesus told Martha, *"Your brother will rise again"* (v22). She correctly replied, *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"* (v23). But Jesus was about to demonstrate that resurrection is not confined to the last day; that resurrection life is experienced by people wherever and whenever Jesus is present: *"I am the resurrection and the life", Jesus explains. "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* (vv25-26).

All of God's chosen people will one day receive brand new, magnificent immortal bodies. Sometimes people speak of "the frozen chosen." There are Christians who claim to be God's chosen people but are as good at relating to non-Christians as a block of ice. But there are a number of people, typically rich people like Tom Cruise in *Vanilla Sky*, who seek to make themselves the frozen chosen; who have themselves refrigerated when they die in the hope that one day they will rise to a new life. The *New York Times* reports the recent ruling of a French court to bury or cremate the bodies of a couple placed in a refrigerated crypt in the basement of their family chateau. Dr. Raymond Martinot, a distinguished biologist had been fascinated by cryonics. He had the refrigerated case built in his cellar in 1974 expecting it would be used for his own body. But his much younger wife, Monique, died first and he put her in it....After Martinot himself died, his son followed his detailed instructions, even injecting the body with anti-coagulants. He then brought the body home from a Paris hospital in a refrigerated ambulance.

For non-Christians resurrection belongs to the world of science fiction and Hollywood movies. Not only the Martinots, but the Egyptians with their pyramids, and countless others, have come up with the most extraordinary methods for trying to ensure they will rise to a new and better life. But it is all so pathetic. Nobody has ever conquered death and nobody ever will. The supreme proof of our Lord's power and greatness is his conquest of death. The resurrection of Lazarus is soon surpassed by the even more glorious resurrection of Jesus himself. John 11, in presenting Jesus as the source of resurrection life, prepares us for the experience of the last day anticipated by Martha. For on that day when all of the Lord's people rise again in the general resurrection, the greatness and magnificence of God will be revealed in an unprecedented fashion. Lazarus' corpse stank after four days in the tomb but, if you'll excuse the pun, that is immaterial. Whether four days or four thousand years it makes no difference. All who believe will see the glory of God just as surely as those present saw the glory of God

when Lazarus was raised and even more so when Jesus was raised. But do realise that whenever people see the reality of resurrection life in us then they are seeing the glory of God. Only God can change our lives and transfer us from death to life. We need to be so full of resurrection life that people will be forced to wonder what it is that makes us tick, forced to come to the only conclusion, that the only explanation for the vitality of our life is the presence and power of Jesus Christ.