



"I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE"

Leo Tolstoy, author of *Anna Karenina* and *War & Peace*, wrote another book, *A Confession*. In it he describes how, in his teenage years, he turned his back on Christianity and made pleasure his main aim in life. He threw himself into the social maelstrom of Moscow and St Petersburg, with all the drinking, gambling, and sleeping around that went with it. He married in 1862 and had 13 kids (which must have kept him busy), inherited a large estate, and made a fortune from his books. He said "Yes" to all that this world has to offer, everything that is supposed to make a person feel happy and fulfilled. Yet one question drove him to the verge of suicide:

"What meaning has my existence that the inevitability of death does not destroy?"

Sickness; suffering; death. It's a difficult, heart-breaking subject, isn't it? Because it affects us all, at some point. We might try to fight it or run away from it; we might exercise or take vitamins or eat healthily (or try to). But there's no escaping it: death gets us all in the end.

Or does it?

Does death have the final say? Or does someone else? Let's take a look at:

John 11:1-44

What an amazing story! But what does this have to teach us about life and death? Or maybe death ... and life?

It teaches us that, even in death, in Jesus there is:

1) Purpose. Jesus hears that Lazarus is ill. Now Jesus loves Lazarus' family, so off He goes to heal him, right? Wrong. Jesus stays put – for another 2 days. In fact, by the time He gets there Lazarus is not only ill, he's dead. And he's been that way for 4 days! What is Jesus doing?

Jews 2000 years ago believed that when a person dies their spirit hangs around for 3 days. During that time a regular prophet of God could bring that person back to life. But after 3 days, the spirit departs and the body begins to decay. At that point there's only one man who can raise that person:

The Messiah.

So Jesus has a timescale, and He's sticking to it. But to Lazarus' family it might have seemed as if Jesus was just ignoring them. And we can feel the same – as if our prayers aren't getting through. The message to us all is: Jesus hears. Every word.

But He also has a plan that is bigger than just us.

2) Comfort. After 2 days Jesus says, "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping. But I'm going to wake Him up."

Sleep was a Jewish way of describing death: the body sleeps, the spirit departs. But the disciples misunderstand Jesus and think He's talking literal sleep. So Jesus makes it clear: "Lazarus is dead." How did He know? Because Jesus knows ... everything. It's the same when Martha says, "Rabbi, if only You'd been here, this wouldn't have happened." Truth is: He was. He's there at the birth of every living thing, and He's there at the death of every living thing.

Now this can raise a very challenging question: "If God was there, why didn't He stop this tragedy? Stop that disaster?" To which there may not be an answer, this side of glory. But there is comfort to be found, in Him.

Yes, Jesus was there, in the midst of Lazarus' story.

And He's there in the midst of our stories, too.

3) Empathy. Jesus arrives 4 days after Lazarus' death, to find a family in mourning – sitting *sheva*, the Jewish custom of mourning for 7 days. And Jesus meets them exactly where they're at. Martha: typically pragmatic. Mary: thinking, reflecting, remembering. There are all kinds of people: activists / contemplatives; introverts / extroverts; intellectuals / emotionals. And Jesus is there for them all.

But notice: He's moved, too. He sees what's going on, and how does He respond? He 1) groans, and 2) weeps (the shortest sentence in the Bible – in English anyway!).

Who's He weeping for? For them, Lazarus, all of us.

Which means that, unlike the deities of other faiths, Jesus is not removed from our suffering – He knows it, and feels it. We may not fully understand *Him*, but He does fully understand *us*.

And that includes when we're broken, and weak.

4) Hope. All this time the people are muttering, "Couldn't this man who has healed even the blind have done something about *this?*"

In response, Jesus tells them to shift the stone. And Martha, practical as ever, says, "Rabbi, he's been dead for 4 days. He's going to stink!" If a man hasn't showered for 4 days, he smells. If a man hasn't *breathed* for 4 days ... But Jesus tells them to move it. He prays. And then He says, "Lazarus, come out!" (And to quote Augustine, He had to say 'Lazarus' or He would've raised the entire graveyard.)

And Lazarus comes back to life.

What is going on? Jesus is doing something only God can do: He's reversing time, and giving Lazarus' family a glimpse of what will happen in the future – mine, and yours. The point being: death is not the end. We are *all* going to rise.

But unlike Lazarus, we will never die again.

Wait For The Plot-Twist

And that's what Jesus means when He says, slap-bang in the centre of this story:

Anokhi hat'qumah v'ha'chayim.

"I am the resurrection and the life." Followed by, "If you believe in Me, though you die, you will live." And then, this question, the greatest question of them all: "Do you believe this?"

As Leo Tolstoy discovered, it is the answer to *that* question that makes all the difference.

To life. Death. Everything.

When we face the loss of loves ones, or even our own departure from this world, it can be hard to understand what is going on. Ed Sheeran in his song *Small Bump* puts it this way: "Maybe you were needed up there, but we're still unaware as why." Now some people, when the hard times come, will say, "That's it. I quit. I don't believe anymore." It's like they've gone to the cinema and left after 15 minutes because they don't like where the movie's going. And what they don't realise is: the greatest plot-twist of all time is coming.

Jesus promised a future that is more amazing than we can possibly get our heads around. And when we trust Him on that, we find purpose, comfort, empathy, and hope. Even in death itself.

Question is: will we hold on for the plot-twist?