

Death: friend or foe?

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[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon, folks. It's good to see you all, and it's good to be back on our Wednesday lunchtimes together. Secondly, over the next few weeks, we're going to be doing things slightly differently.

We're quite used to unpacking a Bible passage together on a Wednesday lunchtime. But over the next few weeks, I'm going to try and address a few topics that I think are raised around the Christmas period.

Big issues that are flagged up that we are aware of, but also our non-Christian family and friends. And the aim in doing that is really to help equip us all to have better conversations with our non-Christian family and friends, to find point of contact with them, that we can then share the gospel with them.

But they will be a lot more evangelistic. They'll be mostly focused at non-Christians. So it's also a good opportunity to invite any non-Christian family and friends along as well.

So please be thinking about who you can invite along. And with that, we're seeing things a bit more topically over the next few weeks. There won't be, as I say, one Bible passage we're unpacking, but I will be looking at different bits in the Bible.

[1 : 07] But for today, if you want to have the Bible open, the best place is probably Genesis 2 and 3, because I'll be quoting from there a couple of times during the talk. Well, let me pray for us quickly.

Father God, we do pray that you'd make this time profitable for us. We pray that you'd make us useful for your kingdom purposes. Help us to be equipped to have better conversations with our family and friends, and that they might come to know the Lord Jesus like we have.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So like I said, over the next few weeks, the plan is to spend some time thinking through some of the made issues that I think are inevitably flagged up around Christmas and New Year.

Big issues that we're confronted with over the festive season, but then put on the back burner, I think, for the rest of the year, because, well, we really just don't want to think about them all that much.

And I think the biggest issue that the festive period raises for us is the problem of death. We do our best to keep our minds off the problem most of the year, but it really comes close to home at Christmas time, doesn't it, when you're sat at a Christmas table with one less place setting there than the year before.

[2 : 26] Christmas is a time when we cherish spending time with our family and our friends, everyone that we love. And so it's inevitable that we feel loss very acutely at that time of year. Now, each of us will have different methods as to how we deal with that acute sense of pain that we feel around that time.

Some of us will silence it, some make light of it, but very few methods actually look at death straight on and get the measure of it. And that's what our plan is to do today.

For Benjamin Franklin said, In this world, nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes. So it seems sensible, doesn't it, to speak about death at some point and try and get the measure of it.

We can't just detach ourselves by making yet another dark and morbid joke like I'm prone to do, or just sweep the problem under the carpet. In fact, it's precisely because we've made such a habit of dodging the issue that as a society we are so utterly confused as to what to make of death.

On the one hand, you get people lobbying the government to legalize euthanasia because they see death as a sweet release from this harsh world that we're a part of. And on the other hand, you

have people wanting to be cryogenically frozen with the hope of tricking death, clinging on to the chance of life at all costs.

[3 : 50] They see death as a dangerous unknown to be avoided at all costs. So how is it that people can have such polar opposite views on death?

What is it? Is it a friend or is it a foe? The views are so conflicting that surely one of them has to be wrong. Or is there a way, perhaps, to reconcile these ideas without fudging the truth?

In November 2016, we were bombarded with headlines about a 14-year-old girl called JS. We weren't giving her full name. She was dying of cancer but wanted her body to be frozen as soon as possible after her death.

Her hope was that in the future, somebody would find a cure for her cancer, defrost her, cure her cancer, and somehow raise her back to life.

She was desperate to live at all costs and would go to any lengths necessary to increase her chance of living, even paying £37,000 to be frozen with no certainty that she could come back.

[4 : 59] But why go to these lengths to cling to life? Well, presumably, the alternative was far more frightening for her. I should imagine JS thought that there was no way of knowing what happens to us when we die.

So the best tactic was to avoid death altogether and give yourself more time. But on the other hand, we have seen the Dignity in Dying movement gaining real momentum in the UK too, formerly called the Voluntary Euthanasia Society.

Unlike the cryonic punters, they perhaps have a bit more steel in their spine and are willing to make a choice and stick with it. They will stick their necks on the line and say that nothing lies beyond the grave, just mindless oblivion.

So in a world that is so full of pain and suffering, why not just escape it all? You'd be better off pushing up the daisies than enduring the trials of this life. In the words of Jim Morrison, who is the lead singer of The Doors, people fear death even more than pain.

It's strange that they fear death, for life hurts a lot more than death. At the point of death, the pain is over. Yes, I guess death is a friend.

[6 : 16] But the problem with both of these positions is that they are both just a best guess. Those who are pro-cryonics admit defeat and say, well, we don't know what lies beyond the grave, and ask for more time to make good decisions about what they will do.

Whereas the euthanasia enthusiasts, well, they simply hope that they've made the right call. But neither can know for certain what death entails. Both parties are forced to make decisions with only a very limited amount of knowledge.

For none of us have seen what awaits us after we die. Even those who have had near-death experiences can't provide us with anything concrete. But perhaps there is a way of attaining more knowledge so that we can get the measure of death.

Where can we look to, or rather, who can we look to, to know what happens when we die?

Shakespeare writes in his play Hamlet, death is the undiscovered country from whose born no traveler returns.

But the astonishing claim of Christianity is that one man has gone through death and has returned.

One man died and rose again from the dead, and that was the Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 33] If he really did rise from the dead like the Bible claims, and millions upon millions of his followers after him, then surely he is the one person who is uniquely qualified to give us answers about death.

He is the traveler who has returned from the undiscovered country. So what does Jesus say? Well, Jesus all through his earthly ministry pointed us to the Bible as the place of authoritative truth.

Jesus would encourage us to see what the Bible has to say on the issue, because the Bible's teaching is exactly the same as his teaching. And wonderfully, the Bible can make utter sense of both the views that we've looked at so far.

The Bible makes sense of why we treat death as an enemy to be avoided, but also holds answers as to how we can eventually embrace it as a friend. So what does the Bible have to say to J.S., the girl who set her hopes on living forever through cryonics?

Well, the Bible would in some way affirm her attitude towards death. Death is an enemy. In the beginning, God created a perfect world.

[8 : 45] There was no death, only life. Death is an unnatural thing that entered into our world as a result of humanity's rebellion against God. We read in Genesis 2, verse 15 to 17.

It was a gracious decree.

You can have it all, the Lord says. Enjoy this perfect world that I've created. But the day you try to become like me, try to be something that you're not, try to usurp my gracious and good and life-giving rule, then you will reap what you sow.

But despite the warning, humanity wouldn't listen. Genesis 3, verse 1 to 7. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, Did God actually say you shall not eat of the tree in the garden? And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

[10 : 14] Well, that's new. God said they weren't allowed to touch it. But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Humanity were deceived by Satan, who had painted God as a restrictive and cruel God, and humanity grasped become more than they possibly could be.

They wanted to be like God and dictate what was right and wrong, to become the rule makers, and the consequences were catastrophic. When humanity rebelled against God, who is the life giver, humanity were cut off from the source of all life.

They got what they asked for, knowingly or not. God treated them with the dignity that he bestowed upon them, and gave them what they ultimately chose. Death. That's what you get if you reject life.

[11 : 30] And since then, all humanity has faced the same terrible judgment from God. Death. Death broke into our world and has wreaked havoc ever since.

Death, being an intruder therefore, then explains why death jars with us so much. People say it's just a natural part of life. Part of the great circle of life, the quote wise old Mufasa from The Lion King.

But it doesn't feel that way, does it? We feel a great injustice when a family member dies. It feels abnormal and alien. When I used to work as a doctor, I used to always feel very unnerved when asked to confirm a patient's death that I was looking after.

When you walk into that room for the first time after they passed away, you felt that you ought to say something to them. It just felt so alien and wrong that they were no longer there anymore, but their body was still present.

We feel that life should be permanent, but it isn't. Death is unnatural and alien, and it is right that we should hate it and want to avoid it.

[12 : 43] It's an affront to our humanity. But there's something else that the Bible would say to JS, and that is that she needn't stay in the dark about what happens when you die.

The Bible is very clear as to what awaits us when we die. We don't have to play guessing games or hold out for more time by being cryogenically frozen. The Bible says that there are only two destinations that await us, heaven or hell.

Unfortunately for those backing euthanasia, the oblivion just simply isn't an option. But those two destinations should give us serious concerns and make us think seriously about it now.

If it's true, then we all know where we'd rather end up, don't we? God has been very kind in revealing to us what happens when we die in both Jesus' teaching and the rest of the Bible.

He didn't have to warn humanity about what happens when we die in the possibility of hell. We said that we wanted nothing to do with him. He owes us nothing. He had no obligations to warn us, but he did because he's good and he loves us.

[13 : 54] But how can we ensure that we avoid hell? Well, Jesus didn't come just to warn us about death and judgment after, but also to face death and judgment in our place.

The Bible says, we have rebelled against the life giver and as a result, he will give us what we've asked for in time. Death is the fitting punishment for our rejection of God and not only a physical death, but a spiritual death to be cut off from him and all his goodness forever and ever, that which

we call hell.

But God in his kindness has given us a way out. He came himself into our world and took the punishment for us. Jesus came and died for us, took the punishment, faced hell on the cross so that we might not have to.

JS, Jesus would say, you can know what death entails, but put your trust in me, the one who is the only authority on death, and ensure you end up where you want to in the end.

Jesus makes full sense of why we feel uneasy about death, but also reveals to us what lies beyond that we might avoid that deadly destination we all fear we might end up in.

[15 : 15] And all we must do is believe to trust in Jesus, the great traveler who's come back from the undiscovered country. But what does the Bible have to say to those who back euthanasia then?

What does it have to say to those who see death as just a sweet release from this world? Well, first of all, the Christian worldview is clear, as I've mentioned already, that sweet nothingness isn't what lies ahead.

Jesus, the only authority on life and death, points us to the Bible for an authoritative answer on what lies beyond the grave. He doesn't encourage us to construct what death is like for ourselves.

He doesn't want us to delude ourselves and convince ourselves that it's nothing to worry about, which is what most of my family do. However, Jesus does say, like the euthanasia supporter, that death can be treated as a friend rather than an enemy.

However, he says that on very different grounds to the euthanasia supporter. Jesus says that death can only be treated as a friend if you have trusted in him to face hell, that separation from God, on the cross, on your behalf already.

[16 : 29] For the Christian, death can be a door, a way to pass through into another world where pain, tears, and heartache are no more. And they can be certain that because that is what Jesus promised.

The Bible climaxes with this picture of a new world which will arrive when Jesus returns in Revelation 21. Let me read for us from verse 1. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for a husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. And the entry to that new world that we long for, that world of no more death, no more crying, no more pain.

[17 : 45] It's the same for the euthanasia supporter as it was for JS. Jesus says this to a woman in John's gospel after he'd raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus said to her, 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. Jesus says that for all those who believe in him, though they will inevitably die, they will still need to pay for a funeral.

He's not saying we will not physically die. They will live again after death. Jesus says, there is life after the grave for those who place their hopes on him.

Life to the full, life everlasting. And all you need to do is believe. Believe that Jesus really did die on a cross, taking the punishment of hell for you and thanking him for it by living your life with him and for him rather than in rebellion against him.

If you do that, well, you can treat death as a friend rather than a foe. And countless believers in Jesus have approached death with that confidence since.

[18 : 59] The apostle Paul, who was commissioned by Jesus, confidently wrote this about his impending death. He said, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

He had his life turned around from persecuting the early church and murdering Christians to live for Jesus. And he could actually look forward to death. He saw it as great gain.

And why is that? Well, for Paul, this life was the closest to hell he was going to ever have to experience. The pain, the suffering, the heartache that he experienced here will be no more when death finally took him.

Jesus had paid his sentence and risen from the dead and returned to heaven declaring that all those who trusted in him would experience the exact same thing. So Paul had great confidence. and embraced death as a friend. But what about you? The terrible irony for those who think death is a sweet release is that what they're experiencing now is the best that they can hope for if they haven't trusted in Jesus.

[20 : 14] They think that death will end the tears and the despair that they experience now. But Jesus says that they're badly mistaken. Death is not a friend to be embraced for those who have not trusted in him.

Things will be far worse for them after they die than they are now. What you experience now on this broken and harsh planet is the closest to heaven you will ever experience if you have not put your trust in Jesus.

But for the Christian it's the closest to hell that they will ever have to experience. Well to conclude I think that the Bible's teaching best matches up with our experience of death in this world.

It just solidifies that idea that it is unnatural and devastating. It matches up with what we feel. But yet it also shows us how we can eventually embrace death as a friend which is what we all long for. I'm convinced by what both Jesus and the Bible teach. What do you think? What will you do? Will you keep on just guessing what lies ahead?

[21 : 26] Get frozen to buy yourself more time so you can become more informed perhaps? Or will you trust the only man who has ever travelled beyond the grave and come back to tell the tale?

You might feel immortal bulletproof even I know I often do. Some of us here may feel like we're in a prime even indestructible even though the grey hairs and the deteriorating bodies tell us otherwise. But death is inevitable. It's crucial that we think about it seriously. There's a lot on the line if Jesus is to be believed then it's not just a matter of life and death it's a matter of heaven and hell.

So I'd appeal to you put your trust in the one man who has cheated death not in your own hopeful thinking. And if you're not at that point yet if you're here today and you're not a Christian then please do come and chat to me afterwards before slipping away.

I'd love to try and help you on that journey. And if you are a Christian well isn't this glorious news for us? Haven't we got wonderful assurance and we should be very thankful for that.

[22 : 37] But not all our friends and family have the same assurance that we do. So let's try and find an opportunity this week to try and use this talk as a means to make contact with them and get them to think seriously about life and death.

Let me pray for us. Father we recognise that death is just a really painful topic and we're not surprised that we try and brush it under the carpet so often and don't really want to touch it or deal with it.

But Father we do recognise that we do need to get the measure of it for we will all face it one day. Father we do pray that all of us might be able to approach death in the future with real confidence knowing that we belong to you.

And for anyone here who does not know you we pray you'd help them to think seriously that you'd cut through any self-delusion that they may have that we're all prone to having thinking the best being the most hopeful we can about life and our circumstances cut through it all and help them to think seriously we pray and we pray that we might be a help to them as they do so.

So please Lord just give us real assurance of what awaits us and help us to be thankful for what we have and help us to try and have useful conversation with our friends and family this week as a result.

[24 : 07] In Jesus name Amen.