

Is Death the Final Word? ***1 Corinthians 15:20-34***

Just before Easter 2003, eight young people crammed into a Volkswagen Golf hatchback – six girls in the front seats; two male year 12 students in the hatch section at the rear. The driver lost control on Mona Vale Road and slammed into a power pole. The two young men were killed.

The principal of their school said: "They were tremendous boys who were extremely popular, not just with students, but staff. Both were boarders. Both had just taken part in a GPS tennis premierships a couple of weeks ago and were extremely good sportsmen. Both had performed alongside each other in the 17a rugby side last year. They had also both just finished their year 12 exams last Thursday. I'm lost for words. It's an absolute tragedy and, to be honest, it's still sinking in."¹ We think of it as such a great tragedy.

Imagine a slightly different scene. Instead of eight young people crowded into that Volkswagen, imagine there were eight octogenarians. You have to use your imagination. The two male 80 year olds travelling in the hatch compartment were killed when the car slammed into the power pole. How do you feel about that? Is that as much a tragedy as the two HSC students being killed?

Why do we think the first is more tragic than the second?

- Those two young people had their whole lives to look forward to. They were strong and energetic – beginning to realise their potential. They had so

¹ *Sun Herald*, 13 April 2003, 13.

much to look forward to – career, marriage, family, retirement. All that taken from them in the blink of an eye.

- On the other hand, two octogenarians? They've already had a full life. They're well and truly past their prime. They've been going downhill for some time. They're probably a significant burden on the taxpayer. They're probably suffering from arthritis and cancer and blocked arteries. They've already had ten bonus years on the three-score plus ten.

Yet, that's not the only way to look at it. If you come at it from another perspective, the relative values can change significantly.

- Two young people? Yes, they have potential – but it's still only potential. It'll cost a lot to train them to the level where they can contribute significantly to society. A lot of time and effort will go into that exercise. They may choose to drop out along the way. They may think it's all too hard. They may never reach their full potential.
- On the other hand, two octogenarians? They're already fully trained. They have years of experience. They've acquired vast measures of knowledge. What a tragedy for society to lose all that knowledge and experience.

The truth is that death makes a mockery of our lives – and it does it whether we die young or old. If I put in my time on this earth (my 10 years or my 50 years or my 90 years) and I die and that's the end of it – if I as a person cease to exist – what's the point of it all? What's achieved? What's it matter if I lived 10 years or 60 years if I have no memory of it once it's finished? Death makes

a mockery of our lives.

The Origin of Death

And so it should – for death wasn't part of God's original creation of humanity. Did you pick that up in that part of the Bible we read earlier? Verse 21:

For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

Death wasn't part of the way God originally made Adam and Eve. They were made to relate with God forever. Yet, that situation was changed. Something happened to damage the relationship between God and humans – for *death came through a man*. Something happened that significantly threatened the intended forever relationship.

At the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, everything was good. There was peace and harmony. It was paradise – both physically and relationally.

- Adam and Eve lived in harmony with each other.
- Adam and Eve lived in harmony with their environment.
- Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God.

Something changed that. Adam sinned. He rebelled against God. Instead of continuing in harmony with God, Adam chose to go against God. He ate the fruit he was told not to eat.

What was it like for that piece of rebellion to be dropped into a world of peace and tranquillity? We can't fully comprehend it because it's beyond our normal experience. We live in a world lacking peace and harmony.

- Nation fights against nation.
- Ethnic group fights against ethnic group.
- Neighbour fights against neighbour.
- Husband fights against wife.
- Child fights against parent.

Our news broadcasts are full of events that show violence and disharmony.

What would it be like to live in an environment:

- Where there was no anger?
- Where there was no hatred?
- Where there was no fear?
- Where there was no deceit?
- Where there was no greed?
- Where everyone was content?
- Where everyone was friendly?

It's beyond our current experience – yet, it was like that in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve sinned. They lost that perfect environment.

Their rebellion against God brought with it all those wrong attitudes – anger, hate, fear, deceit, greed, pride, envy, strife, lust, arrogance, malice – all those wrong attitudes that bring disharmony to our lives day by day. Those things in themselves make life much less than God intended it to be. Those things add their own fragrance of death to our lives. In addition, their rebellion against God also brought death as God's judgment. Death came as an intrusive punishment into God's good creation.

Further, as the verse in our passage says, death spread to all humanity. Adam and Eve aren't alone in their rebellion against God. Every human born since then is born with a rebellious tendency inherited from Adam's original

revolt. Every human born since then chooses to exercise that rebellious tendency by actually doing rebellious acts against God. Every human born since then comes under God's judgment on rebellion – namely, death. Each one of us dies. You and I don't expect to break the trend. Death makes a mockery of our lives.

The Origin of Resurrection

Yet, it wasn't God's intention that death be the last word. Thus, God sends another man – the divine man, Jesus Christ. Jesus never rebelled against God.

- He never rejected what God wanted.
- He never said anything wrong.
- He never did anything wrong.
- He always did His Father's will.

He lived a perfect life.

Yet, Jesus died – most cruelly, on a cross. But the Bible assures us He didn't die for His own sin, for He had none. Thus, His death isn't the judgment of God on some wrong He Himself did – rather, His death is God's judgment on the rebellion of other people. Jesus dies as a substitute – He dies in the place of others.

This was God's long-term plan – for death wasn't to have the last word. Through Adam, death was introduced to the entire human race. Through Jesus, God introduces the resurrection of the dead. The original intention of God – a forever relationship between God and humans – is now a possibility again. Death has been overcome. Life can have the final say.

The important question is: Who gets to participate in the resurrection? Is it only Jesus? After all, Jesus is the only

one who's never rebelled against God. Jesus is the only one who always lived the way God wanted Him to live. Is He, then, the only one who participates in the resurrection?

No – for verse 20 refers to Jesus as *the firstfruits*. That is, Jesus will be the first of many who'll also join in the resurrection. Verse 22 refers to *all* who'll be made alive *in Christ*. It's God's intention that there be many humans sharing this forever relationship with Himself.

At this point, we must look carefully at the text. At first glance, it looks like everyone shares the resurrection. Verse 22:

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

Who *dies in Adam*? Every human who's ever lived. Who *will be made alive in Christ*? Will that not also be every human who's ever lived? At first glance it may look like that – but that's not what the text is saying.

Rather, it says this.

- Who dies in Adam? All those who are *in Adam*. How do you work out whether or not someone's *in Adam*? Someone's *in Adam* if they descend from Adam and share Adam's rebellion against God. That does, in fact, include the whole human race. Thus, the whole human race shares in death.
- Who'll be made alive in Christ? All those who are *in Christ*. How do you work out whether or not someone's *in Christ*? Jesus doesn't have physical descendants the way Adam does. You can't get to being *in Christ* by some form of physical birth. Rather, you get to being *in Christ* through a spirit-

ual birth. It's a birth whereby you give up your overall rebellion against God and join God's side. It's a birth through which you become a Christian – you now *belong to Jesus*, as verse 23 puts it.

Thus, while every person shares in death, not everyone will share in resurrection. Not everyone will share the forever relationship with God. Some will continue to the end in their rebellion against God and thus miss out on life forever with God. Some refuse to become Christians. Some refuse to give up their independence from God. God offers resurrection to all – yet, not all choose to accept it. Some, even many, continue to reject God. They'll miss out – forever.

The Timing of the Resurrection

But, you may say, we don't yet seem to see Christians being resurrected. Why not? Is it all a hoax? Christians seem to still be dying just as much as anyone else. Does this talk of resurrection actually mean anything?

That's the sort of thing these people in Corinth said – even people in the church at Corinth. That's part of the reason Paul wrote this letter. Some in Corinth were saying: There is no resurrection of the dead. Paul wanted to set them straight. Thus, he highlights the timetable for when these things would happen. Five steps.

1. Verse 20: Jesus has been raised from the dead. That's already happened. Paul provided them the historical evidence for that back in verses 5 to 8. There were lots of witnesses who saw Jesus alive after He'd been dead and buried. The resurrection of Jesus was an historical event – and still is. That's where God

introduced resurrection as the antidote to death. That's where God's plan to overcome the intrusion of death was put into telling effect.

2. Verse 25: Jesus *must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet*. That's what's happening now. It's been happening for the last 2000 years. The main way it's done at present is through the preaching of the gospel – the good news of Jesus. As people respond positively to the gospel, so they change sides. They give up their rebellion against God and deliberately come under the rule of King Jesus. They enter into the life God gives them.
3. Verse 23: when Jesus returns, those who belong to Him will be resurrected. While Christians enter into the life God gives them now, they don't fully enter into it until the time when Jesus returns. Thus:
 - In the present, Christians still sin – they still do things that don't please God. Christians haven't yet reached perfection.
 - In the present, Christians still die. The time of the resurrection hasn't come yet.
4. Verses 24-26: all forces that oppose God will be overcome. This happens at the same time as 23. Any rule or authority or kingdom or power that's set itself up in opposition to God – including rebellious humans – will be defeated in a final way. In one sense, they've been defeated already – that happened back at the cross. Yet, there comes a time when their defeat will become totally evident to all. At that time, verse 26, *the last enemy to be destroyed is death*.

5. Verses 24 and 28: Jesus will hand the kingdom to the Father. Then God's plan of having humans live in a forever relationship with Himself will be realised. Then perfect harmony will be restored.

- Harmony between humans and God.
- Harmony in human relationships.
- Harmony between humans and their environment.

Thus, it isn't expected that Christians be resurrected at the present time. That's still future. That awaits Jesus' return. The enemy of death hasn't yet been abolished finally. Now's the time when people are given the opportunity to join those who'll be resurrected when Jesus returns. Now's the time to change sides – to give up the rebellion and join Jesus. Only those who are in Christ will be resurrected to life with God forever.

The Impact of the Resurrection

That doesn't mean, however, that the Christian's belief in the resurrection has no impact on this current life. Paul mentions three areas.

First, verse 29:

Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?

I'm going to skip over that one this morning, because I'm not sure what Paul means by it. There are forty different suggestions put forward as possibilities. We don't have time to look at them all this morning – and, even if we did, we wouldn't come to definite conclusions. This is the only place in the Bible where the concept of *baptism for the dead* is mentioned – and Paul doesn't indicate whether or not he agrees with the practice. He just uses

their practice to illustrate a point.

Secondly, and one that is clearer and challenges us more directly, verse 30:

And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I die every day – I mean that, brothers – just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised,

*"Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die."*

God gave Paul the task of telling other people the message of the resurrection – the message about Jesus. That task proved rather difficult. The task in itself wasn't hard – he just had to understand the message and explain it to others. However, people's reaction to that message caused all sorts of difficulties.

- They argued with him.
- They beat him up.
- They had him arrested.
- They threw rocks at him.
- They had him beaten with rods.
- They whipped him.
- They tried to kill him.

Why would Paul put up with that sort of treatment?

Certainly, says Paul, he wouldn't put up with it if there were no resurrection. If this life's all there is, why put up with such bad treatment? Why bother being beaten up all the time? Why not just enjoy the pleasures of life – eat and drink for tomorrow we die? Yet, Paul believed passionately in the resurrection – so passionately that he

endured all those things for the sake of trying to persuade others to join him in the resurrection. He believed God's word.

- He believed those who die in Christ enjoy the forever relationship with God.
- He believed those who die outside of Christ – not in Christ – not only miss out on that, but also face a forever existence without God – something that's horrible beyond our comprehension.

Thus, he did all he could to persuade them to avoid that and to enjoy instead the purpose for which they were made.

Is your belief in the resurrection that strong? Are you equally concerned that people enjoy a forever relationship with God?

Thirdly, belief in the resurrection should have an impact on the way we live. Verse 33:

Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God – I say this to your shame.

The resurrection is a forever relationship with God. What does such a life look like? Isn't it a life of perfect harmony – with God, with one another and with our environment? Isn't that what we desire?

- Within such a life, what place is there for wrong actions? What place is there for murder and rape and theft and physical attacks and divorce and child abuse and gossip and slander and disobedience to parents? None at all.
- Within such a life, what place is there for wrong

thoughts? What place is there for anger and hate and fear and deceit and greed and pride and envy and strife and lust and arrogance? None at all.

If we desire the resurrection – a life free of such things – why do we hang onto them in the present?

- Why do we insist on competing with one another about the number of things we have in our lives?
- Why do we insist on getting our own way in our disagreements with other people?
- Why do we insist on hurting other people with our gossip and slander?
- Why do we feed our pride and lust and greed?

Those things aren't consistent with the life we say we want. Don't we believe in the resurrection? Don't we long for the harmony of heaven? Or are we too keen on enjoying our rebellion?

Conclusion

Death wasn't part of God's original plan for humanity. It comes as an intrusion in our lives. We're right to think of it that way. We're right to want to hang onto life – yet, not life characterised by rebellion against God; not life spoiled by human sin.

People grasp for immortality.

- Some try to obtain it through finding the mythical elixir of life. They grasp all the modern medical marvels that'll give them those extra few years of life.
- Some try to obtain it through being famous – or even by being infamous. They make a name for themselves that'll live on after their deaths.
- Some try to obtain it through establishing a family

dynasty. They build an empire that'll be carried on by their children – and then try to control those children through the construction of their will.

The good news of the Bible is that death doesn't have to have the final word. God has provided an alternative – resurrection. That alternative's available for all who'll give up the rebellion and trust Jesus. What's more, it comes as a gift. It's not something you have to achieve – indeed, you can't achieve it. You can only accept it as a gift from God. The challenge is twofold:

- For those who haven't yet accepted the gift – will you do so? Will you give up your rebellion against God and join God's side? Will you opt for God's purpose for you – resurrected life in His presence? Or will you continue to hang onto death and all that's involved in that?
- For those who have accepted the gift – does your belief in the resurrection truly impact your life now? Does your life look like a resurrected life? Or are you clinging to the things that are part of an anti-God life? Do you long to see others also accept God's offer of the resurrection? Are you encouraging others in that direction?

Our society has forgotten this. We simply accept death – when it happens to old people who have lived a full and good life. We are happy to accept that is all there is to it.

A drop of ink into a glass of clear water.
A wrong chord in a piece of music.