

## **The Death of Death**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-26; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18**

**Rev. Jonathan Lacy**

**July 30, 2023**

Last week Phil addressed that there's a dying desire for the divine in our culture. While the trends are swinging the opposite worldwide, in the West, not only do fewer people believe in God, but the option of believing in a god seems to be coming off the table entirely. Despite this, the divine diligently digs at our culture's soul. Questions like what's the meaning of life, why is there a wrong and right, and is there anything bigger than myself, are still prevalent. This led us to see that if we were to speak to the times it would be better for us to give it residence rather than resources. Lastly, we saw one place we see eternal residence is with children. If that's appealing to you, I encourage you to watch the sermon online. Today I'll preach a similar sermon gearing hearts to the eternal but with one key difference. Instead of infants & children exposing what's eternal, I want us to consider the other end of the human experience: death.

How do you view your own death? Is it something that scares you? Does it make you angry or confused? Or perhaps, like many of us here, you've gone a whole week, month, or year without considering the reality that this life is not forever. Wherever you are on that spectrum, it's worth acknowledging that today it's challenging to face this subject. Of course, there have always been hardships with mortality but for the last 100 years, the West has been uniquely ill-equipped to handle this topic due to modernity and post-modernity. These beliefs have made death something that isn't merely difficult in itself but additionally is taboo.

As Christians, we must realize that a lack of reflection on our earthly death is robbing us of the hope and comfort of our promised eternal life in Christ. This morning, using Paul's words to the Corinthians, I want us to see one truth: And that's because God is who He says He is, in Christ, you're going to outlive death and that changes everything. Again, because God is who He says He is, in Christ, you're going to outlive death and that changes everything. Before that, like a soccer player taking a penalty kick, we need to take a couple of steps back prior to launching forward into the text to understand the city of Corinth.

Corinth is a city, that still exists, on a thin strip of land that joins the mainland of Greece to its southwest peninsula. Built by Julius Caesar in 44 BC, it served as a center of government and commerce. According to Guy Waters, a professor at RTS, "The city was characterized by the wealth that trade brought and by the power that the Roman presence represented... Every kind of person from all over the Roman Empire settled there." While being different in many ways, the city of Corinth reminds me of South Florida. They're both melting pots in the truest sense of the phrase. Both have every promise of wealth, conceived ideology, and aspirations of success. Yet, I make this comparison because not only do the locations have similarities but so do the churches.

In both, you could find those who, in the words of Paul, prefer the "wisdom of this age" to the wisdom of God. Though the Corinthians accepted the Gospel at first, they began to be confused about what to do with the differences between what scripture and their cultural context said. In almost every subject, sexuality, forgiveness, or how to treat their neighbor, they would hold it up and sometimes follow Christ

and other times follow what was correct with their day. In short, they chose to keep the title of Christ follower while not following apostolic teachings.

I'm confident you've seen professing believers like this. Their beliefs about sexuality, justice, dignity, and so on, often come from our culture and not Christ. We look at these people and ask: "Don't they see that they're denying the Bible they claim to believe?" While there are valid points to make here, there's one Biblical truth that many Corinthians and Christians today have denied I want to focus on. It's spread so fast that I've seen it in every branch of Christianity. It's held by Liberal Christians, Conversation Christians, White Christians, Black Christians, Pentecostals, and Presbyterians alike. Similar to the Corinthians, many of us have listened to the wisdom of this age regarding our resurrection. Let me explain.

Similar to Gnostics, the Greeks denied a physical resurrection because why would anyone want that when what's physical is bad? Our culture denies a physical resurrection because that's impossible when there's nothing transcendent. Where the Greeks viewed the physical as bad and the spiritual as good, we view the physical as all there is and the spiritual as non-existent. This has led us to despise aging and hide any evidence of death. Instead of discussing our mortality, we desire to delay death indefinitely. Rather than seeing it as a natural aspect of living in a fallen world, we see it as something to battle even if it only adds a year, month, week, or day to our life. While there's nothing wrong with utilizing the healthcare God has provided for us, as Christians our motivations behind our so-called "fight" matter. Preserving life to serve those around us or to give thanksgiving to God is one thing, but extending our fallen days because we fear what's to come is another.

In her book "The Lost Art of Dying", Dr. Dugdale has this to say about death:

*"In the hospital today, descriptions of illness and disease are filled with the language of warfare. His grandfather is battling pneumonia. My friend is a cancer survivor. I'm going to beat this infection. And so forth. We march forward, as determined as military generals, reminding our loved ones and ourselves that there is no reason to fear the enemy. We have the strongest healthcare system of all time; no disease can conquer us... As a medical doctor, I have watched patients push off questions of death time and time again. It's difficult for these people to die well when they go to the grave haunted by questions they consistently chose to ignore. In failing to die well, we fail to live well. By avoiding questions of the meaning of death, we avoid questions of the meaning of life. By avoiding finitude, we ignore infinitude" (The Lost Art of Dying by Dr. Dugdale; Pages 95; 147)*

Does this resonate with you? Do you feel as though death is to be avoided? If so, why? Our culture is scared to death... of death. Yet, in Christ, we have no reason to be. In our city death is taboo. But for us, to make death taboo is to rob us of the joy of what's to come. Paul reminds us ... if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

If there's no resurrection what's the point of any of this? Why are we here this morning? It's pointless. If there's no resurrection then I'm still in my sins, I'm still an enemy of God and when I die, I perish for good. I'll be forgotten shortly after my death and therefore my life and all I did in it will be meaningless. Yet, this isn't the situation we're in. If God is who He says He is, in Christ, I'm going to outlive death and that changes everything. I no longer need to fear death.

Let me ask again: How do you view *your* death? As we age it's something we consider more, but if you're a man or woman of the times, it's a question we don't frequently think about. Let me encourage you to not listen to the wisdom of this age regarding your resurrection. Our confidence in our resurrection isn't in us but in who God is. As 2 Corinthians 1:20 reminds us "All the promises of God find their "yes" in Christ." This includes the resurrection. The grave is empty. Resurrection has already taken place. Because God is who He says He is, in Christ, you're going to outlive death and that changes everything.

This is what Paul also roots the Corinthian's faith in. At the beginning of the chapter we read in verse 3: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

By saying "according with the Scriptures" Paul is reminding us that Christ's death and resurrection aren't a new invention, rather it was prophesied in the OT. Secondly, by giving the Corinthians a numerous list of people Christ appeared to after resurrection showed that He is indeed alive. This then leads Paul to a conclusion. It's not enough to understand that Jesus was resurrected, but we must also see that Christ's resurrection directly demands our deliverance from death.

Verse 20 "in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, (he is) the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Yes, in Adam all who have come from him, like you and me, because of sin will die, but in Christ, all who come from Him in faith, because of grace, will see resurrection. When Christ returns, He will destroy every enemy including death itself, and as it is with all of God's enemies, death will be used to serve His ways. As George Herbert said: "Death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener." What was for our shame is now used for our glory. This is reality not because it sounds nice. It's because God is who He says He is. It's important that we anchor our belief on Christ, and not ourselves because while we would do things one way, Christ tends to always allow outcomes that seem counterintuitive so that His glory might be more fully displayed.

In his writings entitled “On God and Christ”, St Gregory says this:

*“He bids us take courage, for He has conquered the world. Yet doing so by mystery of things to come. He hungered, but He fed thousands. He thirsted, but He cried, Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink... He was tired, but He is the rest of those who are weary. He pays taxes, but He is the emperor of those who demanded it of him... He prays, but He hears prayer. He weeps, but He will one day cause tears to cease. He was sold, and at a very cheap price – merely for thirty pieces of silver – but He redeems the world, and that at a very great price – for the price was His own blood. Like a lamb, He is led to the slaughter, but He is the shepherd of Israel. Like a sheep He is silent, yet He is the Word. He was bruised and wounded, but He cures every disease and every sickness. He is lifted up on the tree and nailed there, but He restores us by the tree of life... He is given vinegar to drink and is fed with gall – who? He who turned the water into wine, and who is Himself most sweet and altogether desirable. He lays down His life, but He has the power to take it again... He dies, but He gives life and by His death He destroys death. (On God and Christ by St Gregory of Nazianzua Pages 87-88)*

This is who Christ is. If it’s true that our confidence in *our* resurrection is directly tied to the savior we believe in, I guess the question I want to ask you is: Who is Christ to you? Is He just another good teacher? Is He just some prophet? Or is He the Son of God? If He’s just a good guy have no confidence in your eternal life. Yet, if God is who He says He is, the Alpha and Omega, then in Christ we will outlive death and that changes everything.

Christ’s death and resurrection happened according to the Scriptures, but don’t forget that *your* death and resurrection will happen according to the scriptures. If we have faith in Christ’s resurrection, then we must be just as confident in our own. I think it’s easy to intellectually understand to be the correct Christian answer, but as you lay on your deathbed do you truly believe that to be true? Maybe you don’t know. The good thing is believing isn’t a one-time deal. Rather, we can understand how much we believe in the resurrection by how much it changes our lives today.

In just over two months my son will be born. It’s wild how much he’s already changed Kara’s and my life. I’ve spent hours assembling his crib, painting his room, and getting Facebook marketplace purchases because we’re balling on a budget. We’re listening to podcasts, YouTube videos, tutorials, everything, and all of this because I believe he’s coming. I know that sounds silly to say, but while he’s very much alive in Kara’s womb, I’ve never held him, for months I never saw him, I don’t even know his name. Yet, despite that, I truly believe he’s coming, and because I believe that it affects my life today.

The same can be said with our belief in our resurrection. Yes, we live in a post-Genesis 3 world that demands death, but we also live in a post-Matthew 28 world that demands resurrection for those in Christ. Because God is who He says He is, in Christ, you’re going to outlive death and that changes everything. While it does change everything, leaving here I want to give you one thing your resurrection changes: Your suffering.

Every week the church receives prayer requests from the congregation and by far the most common prayer requests we get are for physical healing. This is very appropriate considering that God is the great physician and He hears those who call on His name. It's good to pray and expect that God will listen to our prayers. It's good to give thanks when people are healed and needs are provided for, and yet, we're fooling ourselves if we believe that the complete healing of our bodies happens in this life.

2 Corinthians 4:16: So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Instead of viewing our suffering as an absence of God's love, we're called to use it for our good. Too frequently we can get comfortable with the status quo. Suffering allows us to have a holy dissatisfaction with the world. It's not a dissatisfaction that complains or is bitter, rather it's one that patiently is waiting for been promised. So what suffering surrounds your life currently? Practice believing the Gospel by believing the best is yet to come.

God is who He says He is, therefore we can trust Him in this life and the next. It was the Lord who affirmed you into being in this life. There was a day you weren't and then He said you are. There was a day He decided to create life in you in this world, and the day is coming when He will do the same thing again. So trust in Him. Believe in your resurrection as you believe in Christ's resurrection. Your death is now something that can only be used for your good.

Speaking of Christian death, the late Timothy Keller put it like this: *"Rather than lying in fear of death, we should see it as spiritual smelling salts that will awaken us out of our false belief that we'll live forever. When you're at a funeral, listen to God speaking to you, telling you that everything in life is temporary except for His love... Everything in this life is going to be taken away from us, except one thing: God's love, which can go into death with us and take us through it and into His arms. It's the one thing we can't lose."* (Timothy Keller "On Death Pages 25-26)

The world can only give us peace that says, "It probably won't get that bad." Jesus's peace is different. There, even the worst that can happen, your death, and it's ultimately going to be used for your good. Now we can view our death differently. How do I view my death? I'm nervous, but not like the world.

I'm nervous like a child is nervous for his first day of school or a teenage boy attempting his first kiss. Yes, I'm scared but it's due to how excited and unknowing the situation is. My whole life I've known it's best to trust God and leave everything in His hands. Though I genuinely believe that, I often make sure to have some at least apparent sense of control in every situation in my life. At my death, the time comes when I must truly, and in every sense, trust that God is who He says He is. And that is both exhilarating and completely scary. But because God is who He says He is, in Christ, we're going to outlive death and that changes everything.