

April 19/20, 2003
Easter

Death and the Resurrection of Christ

John 11, 1 Corinthians 15
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As you know, Easter is the celebration of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. As magnificent as the resurrection is, what I'd like to talk about is the subject of death. I want us to look at the resurrection of Christ and how that informs our view of death—what we need to think about and process and what we need to learn.

I think in the last 30 days all of us have probably thought more about the value of life and the reality of life and death, because the war in Iraq has been in our living rooms every night. We have been confronted with the realities of life and death and the questions of: How do we respond to it? What do we think about it? What is death really all about?

For some people, the way they think about death is that they just *don't*. Their way of dealing with it is, "I just don't want to think about it. When my time comes, then my time comes, and other than that, I just want to pretend like it's not out there." But the question is: Is that really wise? I would suggest to you that is a huge mistake. We need to learn about death and what it is, and how the resurrection of Jesus Christ affects that, in order to learn how to live.

Another question that arises out of all this is: Is physical death really the ultimate death? I mean, that is what we tend to focus on, and that's what we tend to think about. But is that really the ultimate death? The answer is no, it's not. As a matter of fact, I would suggest to you that physical death is really a metaphor. It's a picture of a much greater death. We are supposed to learn about that greater death by being exposed to the reality of physical death; and by that, we respond in a way that God intends for us to respond.

To really understand this we need to go back to the beginning, which is all the way back to Genesis chapter 2, which I would like to summarize. To begin with, the first time that death ever is even a thought or a subject is in Genesis 2, when God tells Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden that if they eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, they will surely die.

Now we are familiar with this concept of death; that doesn't strike us. But stop and think about the fact that God is an eternal God. He has existed since before there was time—He has always existed. Therefore, all that had ever been in the universe was *life*. This introduction in Genesis 2 was the first time there had ever even been a concept of anything other than life. It was the introduction of the subject of death.

What did God mean by the words "you will die"? I know automatically we think of physical death, but is that really what God is talking about? What is death? We know, because God is eternal, that God is life. It is not just that God is living; it's that *God is life*. In other words, all life flows out of God. He is eternal—He has always been—and everything else that is alive has been sourced in God. Therefore, God is life.

If that is true, and death is the opposite of that, then what is death? Death is the absence of God. Death is separation from God. If God is the source of life, then death is the absence of God. So when God said to Adam and Eve, "You will surely die," what did He mean?

What we *do* know is that at the moment that Adam and Eve sinned, they did not die physically. They began a process of dying that would take hundreds of years. What they *did* do is they died immediately spiritually. In other words, their sin immediately cut them off from a relationship with

God. A holy God cannot have a relationship with sin; therefore there was immediately a barrier. God came looking for Adam and Eve in the garden, and they were hiding; they were covered with their own shame. God kicked them out of the Garden of Eden, which was symbolic of the separation of Adam and Eve from God.

It is in Genesis 3 that we have the first hint that God will do something to deal with sin in order that people can be restored once again into a relationship with Him—that there will be some way to go from spiritual death to spiritual life. And there is a hint in there that it will include the shedding of blood. As the Bible unfolds the story, of course we understand that was the message: that God would Himself become flesh and shed His blood for the forgiveness of sin in order that we might be resurrected from spiritual death to spiritual life.

The fact that Adam and Eve didn't die immediately is something from which we need to learn. Adam and Eve began a process of dying, and we are all in this process of dying. I'm closer to death today than I was yesterday. I'm closer to death today than I was the day before; and tomorrow I'm going to be even closer. But the fact that we have time and we realize the reality of death teaches us something. The fact that God causes this process of dying gives us a chance to come to grips with its reality and to do something, to learn about a greater death which is this spiritual death.

If all God talked about was spiritual life and spiritual death, that would be so big and abstract that it would seem "out there somewhere" and we would say, "I don't know what that means." So we have, in a sense, a metaphor before us. We have a temporary life that ends with physical death, and that is the metaphor, the picture, which is something we learn from. So in order to understand spiritual death, we need to understand physical death.

Physical death is the absence of life. When you go to a funeral where someone is lying in a casket, you can talk to that person...you can be good to that person...you can love that person...you can bring that person a gift. You can bring that person everything this world has to offer, but it is all absolutely irrelevant, because that person is dead. There is an absence of life. There is no ability to respond to anything.

If that is true in physical death, then think about spiritual death. We can believe that God is good, that God is kind, that God is loving. We can believe that God is all of those things. Yet, to a person who is spiritually dead it's irrelevant, because they are unresponsive. There's no connection with God. Those things are a non-issue to someone who is spiritually dead.

People feel that spiritual death. They feel within them the reality that there's something wrong and that something is not quite right. There is something that's missing. People try to fill that void with relationships or with success and titles. They try and fill that void with pleasure and with all kinds of stuff. But if we were to be honest, deep in our heart of hearts we're aware of the fact that something is wrong, something is missing, something is not right. And we wonder, *Isn't there more to life than this?* What we are feeling is that spiritual deadness. We are all created to have a relationship with God. But we are spiritually dead so there is no relationship.

That raises the question: Then what do I do? And the answer is you can't do anything—you're dead. See, that's the problem with religion. Religion is saying that you have to do something, but the reality is you can't do anything because you're dead.

So is it all hopeless? Jesus talks about that in John 11. This is just days before Jesus enters into Jerusalem, where He will be arrested and crucified. This is one of the last great miracles, or what John calls the *great signs*, identifying Jesus as the Savior of the world.

Jesus has a very dear friend named Lazarus, who has two sisters, Mary and Martha. Lazarus is sick and dying, and Jesus responds to that in John 11:4: “When Jesus heard this, He said, ‘This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it.’ ”

Now that’s an interesting statement, because the reality is Lazarus does die (we find that out a couple of verses later). When Jesus says the sickness was “not unto death” He was saying that ultimately Lazarus was not going to die, and the whole purpose of Lazarus’ disease was so that the Son of God could be glorified [“*so that I can show you who I am; I can demonstrate My power*”]. To “be gloried” means to enhance your reputation. So Jesus says He is going to do something in order for people to know who He is, and it has something to do with Lazarus and his sickness.

The story goes on, and in verse 11 Jesus says, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.” Verses 12-14: “The disciples then said to Him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.’ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought he was speaking of literal sleep. So Jesus then said to them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.’ ”

Jesus tells them plainly that Lazarus is dead. And He goes on to say that it’s a good thing for their sake, because He is going to go and do something. He is saying to them, “I’m going to show you something in order that you might believe.”

Jesus is going to go and deal with the death of Lazarus. But the question is: Is Jesus just talking about physical death? Is He saying, “I’m going to show you that I have the power over physical death”? Or is that just a picture? Is that just a sampling that says, “I’m going to show you that I have power over physical death to show you that I am the source of life”? Jesus is saying, “But more than that, that you would believe by faith that I have the power over spiritual death; therefore, I am the Author, the source of eternal life. If I show you that in the physical world, then you will believe it by faith in the spiritual world.”

We see what happens, beginning in verse 17:

So when Jesus came, He found that he [*Lazarus*] had already been dead in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother. Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house. Martha then said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been there, my brother would not have died. Even now, I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give You.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.” - John 11:17-26

What was Jesus talking about there? Was Jesus just talking about physical life and physical death? Obviously He was talking about much more. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live, even if he dies.” Now, that makes no sense unless you understand He is saying, “Even if you died physically, if I give you spiritual life, you will live forever! Whosoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”

We know for a fact that Lazarus was raised from the dead by Jesus, but years later he died. So was Jesus wrong? The answer is no. Jesus wasn’t talking about physical death; he was talking about spiritual life and spiritual death. He was saying that His power over physical death is simply a demonstration of His power, so that we would believe He has power over spiritual death. He not only is the source of life on this earth, but He is the source of life forever.

Therefore, whoever believes in Him shall live, even if he dies. You say, “Well, that’s wonderful. Is that life available to everyone?” What does Jesus say? He says, “Whosoever believes in Me shall live.”

Because we are dead, we cannot do anything. We can’t do anything spiritually, so Jesus did it *for* us. It would just be days later that Jesus would enter into Jerusalem; He would be arrested; and He would be nailed on the cross for the sins of the world. Because Jesus was perfect, He didn’t die for His own sins; He died for our sins. He died *our* death. But it wasn’t just Jesus dying physically. Jesus took upon Himself the sins of the world, and He died our *spiritual death*. He died that death which is eternal. He paid that price. So He doesn’t just offer us physical life; He offers us eternal life. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not just power over physical death. It is the demonstration of life which is eternal that He offers to those who believe.

The Bible is very clear that this life is not where it’s at; this life is not all there is. We make a huge mistake if all we think about is this life and this death, and we miss the fact that death really is a warning. It’s a flashing red light that continually reminds us death is a reality, not that we might be morbid, but so that we might understand there is a greater death. And while we have opportunity in this life, we need to deal with the reality of that death which is eternal. That is the significance of physical death—it is to warn us to deal with a death that lasts forever.

It’s interesting that when Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus, the text says that Jesus wept. That’s not a word that means He shed a tear. That’s a word that means He wept bitterly. He grieved the loss of His friend, because the reality is, death is very painful. Death is this separation where we understand that the person we loved, that person we knew, is no longer alive. And we feel the absence of life. We feel the separation. We feel the fact that that relationship is no longer there. If you have ever experienced the death of someone you deeply cared about, that is the closest you probably get on this earth to sensing what eternal death will be like. It is just a taste, but it’s a horrible taste.

You know, there are a lot of people in our world today who think the afterlife is kind of a joke. They think that hell is just a big party. But it’s really not funny at all. It’s very sobering. Can you imagine experiencing that horrible pain when you lose someone you deeply love—that separation from life—*forever*? That is eternal death: eternally separated from the Author of life. It is a horrible thing.

Jesus went to the cross to demonstrate power over death in order that He might give life eternal. Therefore, whoever believes in Him will live, even if he dies (v25).

Look at 1 Corinthians 15. Jesus has died on the cross; He has risen from the dead; He has ascended back to the Father. Paul brings this altogether and talks about what we’ve been talking about. 1 Cor. 15:1: “Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel [*which means the good news*] which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved.” Saved from what? Saved from eternal death.

What is the message of the gospel? Verses 3-8: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.”

Paul reminds us of this good news—that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins, was buried, rose again, and ascended to the Father. But after He rose from the dead, He appeared to over 500 people as witnesses of the resurrected Christ.

If the message of the gospel was going to be discredited, it would have been discredited in the first century. All they had to do was open the tomb, show the body, and that would discredit the message. As a matter of fact, what happened in the first century is just the opposite. Jesus had many thousands and thousands of enemies who were doing everything they possibly could to discredit the message. But they couldn't.

Paul says he wrote this within the lifetime of those who personally witnessed the resurrected Christ. He is saying, "There were over 500 of them, and if you don't believe me, find them and ask them—they're still alive." The reason the resurrection of Jesus Christ could not be dismissed is because of all the witnesses who could say, "I saw Him." Therefore, the message was determined to be true then, as it is now 2,000 years later.

The resurrection is absolutely critical to our faith. If anybody can prove that the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not occur, He not only does not have power over physical death, but He has no power over spiritual death. That is what Paul says in verses 17-19: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied."

If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, then we are a pitiful people. All we have is just this religious thing that makes us feel better in this life, and we still will suffer an eternal death. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, we will perish forever, and Paul says that's a pitiful thing. Verses 20-22: "But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death [*meaning Adam*)], by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."

There is the reminder that Adam introduced death into the human race—spiritual death that also included physical death from this temporary life on this planet. But it was Jesus Christ who introduced life—life which is eternal, spiritual life—that even if we die, we live.

Beginning in verse 50, Paul talks again about life after death and the reality of that:

Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. - 1 Cor. 15:50-57

Notice all the language that talks about life after death. Right now this body is perishable; this body has to put on imperishables. This body is mortal, but it will put on immortality, so that the saying can come about: "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" Because death has been conquered through Jesus Christ. Not just physical death, but spiritual death—the death that lasts forever—has been conquered through Jesus Christ, that I might receive eternal life.

The reality of Easter is the reality that because Jesus conquered death, because He rose again and He has the power to offer life which is eternal, He is the very source of life for those who believe. Jesus is that source of life if I choose to believe He died on a cross for my sin.

In the time it has taken me to give you this message, 3,150 people have died. Every 30 minutes in our world 3,150 people die. That means there are 3,150 people when I started this message who were alive and had the potential to choose eternal life or choose eternal death. And during the 30 minutes that I have explained this message, they have gone on to eternity, and their opportunity to decide is over. The Bible says a majority of those people will experience death forever. But those who place their faith in Jesus Christ will receive life which is eternal.

This isn't just a game we are playing. We are not playing church here. This is about where you will spend forever, and whether forever you will experience life or forever you will experience death. The reality is you may have tomorrow or you may not have tomorrow. This very day you may be numbered among the 3,150 people whose life will end on this earth every 30 minutes. The reality of death is all around us, and it reminds us there is a greater death we need to deal with. Because as sobering as physical death is, it is nothing compared to death which lasts forever.

It is not a complicated thing. You believe in the quietness of your own heart that you are a sinner and believe that because you could not do anything to save yourself, because you were dead, Jesus died for you. He died *your* death on the cross. And if you believe that, if you embrace that, if you make it your own and you say, "Yes, I believe that He did that for me," then God promises to forgive your sin. God promises to come in and to raise you from spiritual death to spiritual life so that even if you die, you will live.

There are some of you who say, "I know I'm on this spiritual journey, but I still don't get it. I don't understand it. I have all these questions. I'm not ready to make a decision." I understand that. Here at Lincoln Berean we have a small group experience called Faith Search. It is an opportunity for you to meet together with other people who are searching, just as you are. It's a place for you to ask questions, to interact and try to learn and understand. If that would be of interest to you, the next session begins April 27 at 11:00 a.m.

But I would remind you, you have no guarantee of tomorrow. There is a sense of urgency to understand the message and to respond to it. We are talking about *eternity*. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Him will live, even if he dies. And whoever lives and believes in Him shall *never* die!

Our Father, we are thankful for the truth of this message. Lord, help us to understand that this life and this death is not all there is. As a matter of fact, it's just a metaphor, a picture of that which will last forever. Lord, help us to understand that Jesus died on the cross to take our death for us, that those who place their trust in Him might be raised from spiritual death to spiritual life.

Lord, my prayer is that there would be not one person who hears this message that would remain spiritually dead, but would even this day experience the reality of spiritual life forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.