

Radical #7 Deal with Death

1 Corinthians 15

Intro

Benjamin Franklin once famously wrote:

"In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."¹

Margaret Mitchell author of *Gone With the Wind* in 1936 varied Franklin's idea, writing:

"Death, taxes and childbirth! There's never any convenient time for any of them."

Our Federal Government and ASIO tell us that terrorism in Australia is now "probable".

Certain... Inconvenient... probable.

The certainty, inconvenience and probability of death are not topics we like to ponder; especially on Easter Sunday! Surely a smart preacher would opt for a more popular route and keep things focused on hope and chocolate and holidays.

Yet, the hope for full and eternal life that Easter promises to Christians is derived from taking death *very* seriously indeed. It's the very certainty, inconvenience, and even the necessity of death that leads us to an understanding of the fullness of life.

The late John Stott of the UK wrote,

"Life *through* death is one of the most profound paradoxes in both the Christian faith and the Christian life."²

The pattern of Jesus' life stands in stark contrast to a culture that calls people to "look after number one", to ever "get wealthier", to increasingly "get healthier" and to live long and retire comfortably.

Death	Certain
TAXES	Inconvenient
Childbirth	Probable
Terrorism	

¹ Franklin's words were part of a letter written in the 18th Century to a friend, Jean-Baptiste Leroy, a French scientist, a pioneer in the study of electricity. Franklin had been a popular U.S. ambassador to France and was now writing from America. His famous quote about death and taxes related to whether or not the American Constitution would be finalized soon. Ironically, Franklin was not certain at all about whether his friend was dead or alive. He had heard nothing of him for a year and the French Revolution raged such that Franklin feared Leroy might have been killed.

² The Radical Disciple p. 115

There's even great business potential in removing death from life's equation too. In March this year a newly formed company announced plans to build a Cryonics Centre in NSW, the first of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere. The Cryonics Centre will freeze the bodies of its clients in the hope they will be healed and revived years, decades or even centuries from now when new medical miracles are possible.

Woody Allen once famously quipped, "I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens!"

Jerry Seinfeld's early standup routine still rings true:

"According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy."

Christianity is not a morbid faith. It's not joy-less path to self-destruction. But life *through* death is perhaps the hardest message to sell in the wealthiest sectors of the West today.

Life through death

When we look to the Bible for our Easter hope, it's immediately apparent that the real path to life that is full and life that is eternal is through death.



Life *through* death is one of the most profound paradoxes in both the Christian faith and the Christian life.

John Stott

Here are some examples to consider in brief summary:

Firstly, let's think of how the bible presents our **SALVATION**:

- The New Testament tells us that the gift of God is eternal life (Rom. 6:23). That idea is not merely about the span of time. Rather, it's a qualitative promise – it's about life lived in harmony with God (John 17:3).
- Yet the **only way to enter this life is death**. Sin and death are coupled together throughout the story of the Bible (e.g. "...the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life Rom. 6:23).
- If we were to **die for our own sins**, that would be the end of it. So God sent His Son; came to us in human form and did for us what we could not do for ourselves – Jesus' sinless life was given up willingly for ours to deal with sin and death once and for all (e.g. 2 Corinthians 5:21).
- So, the Apostle Paul says those who put their faith in Jesus for eternal life must first **associate wholly and fully with his death**. He writes in Romans 6:11, "count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Secondly, let's look the life through death in **DISCIPLESHIP** – being a follower:

- At Easter the words of Jesus himself are writ large: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must **deny themselves** and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses the life for me and for the gospel will save it (Mark 8:34-35).

- During the Roman occupation of Palestine it was common knowledge that if you saw a man under guard, **carrying a patibulum or crossbar**, you wouldn't need to ask him where he was going! How extraordinary that Jesus should use such an image for the sort of self-denial required of his followers.
- We naturally prefer to stand with modern giants like Rogers and Maslow who trusted in the **potential of humanity and the power of self**. We have been strongly influenced by such 20th Century thinking and we have learned to invest in self-actualization through the likes of education, psychology, scientific discovery, technology and politics. Jesus' own pattern of life and that which he proposed for his followers is seemingly on a collision course with the ways of our 21st Century world.
- Jesus wasn't suggesting the obliteration of the self (as in some Eastern religions). The ancient Greek word 'psyche' is central to Jesus' philosophy. But in direct contrast to our world, Jesus effectively says it's **only in letting go of the selfish self**, that one finds their true identity. It is the complete **reversal and renovation of our sinful self** and its consequences that Jesus came to remedy.
- So, the Apostles advanced Jesus' teaching about being a disciple. They teach us in the New Testament, that by the power of God's Spirit we must **learn to "put to death" or mortify or crucify the sinful, self-indulgent nature within us** (e.g. Romans 8:13).
- There is a way of life that leads to death and there is another way that leads to true life.

Life *through* death in discipleship.

Life *through* death in the Bible

Life *through* in our salvation.

- Salvation [Romans 6:11,23, John 17:3](#)
- Discipleship [Mark 8:34-35, Romans 8:13](#)
- Mission, Persecution, Martyrdom... more

We don't have time to survey other aspects of the Bible's teaching, but we could look at Jesus' teaching about **mission**, about **persecution** for one's faith and even about **martyrdom**. There we would see the same pattern.

Mortality

Recently I conducted a funeral at a cemetery. The funeral director was setting up a sound system alongside the freshly dug grave and one of the gravediggers came over for a chat. Now gravediggers are pretty interesting people. This one was called Bruce and he looked, apart from his high-viz, as if he could easily win an Elvis Presley impersonator's competition. "What song are they gonna play at the service padre?" he asked me inquisitively. " 'Amazing Grace'," said I. "Oh!" shrugged Bruce, disappointed. "Had an interesting one last week," said Bruce too loudly. "They played that song called 'Every breath you take' as the body went into the grave. How'd you like someone singing 'I'll be watching you' at your funeral?" he asked with glee.

I thought if anyone could know what happens after we die, the gravedigger might have some inside knowledge. But sadly, there was nothing more profound to be uncovered in that conversation.

Jerry Seinfeld's latest season of *Comedians in cars getting coffee* has an excellent episode with fellow comic Gary Shandling. Jerry and Gary were long-time buddies and associates. During their conversations in the video they share some gallows humour. Ironically, Shandling died just last week at age 66. Some of the humor shared between the two has eerie overtones of what was about to transpire in Shandling's own life. Standing in the empty *Comedy Store*, where their respective careers had begun, Shandling looks at the wall of names of comics who performed there. "It's like every other person has passed away," he says. "Either personally or professionally," Seinfeld quips. Then they discuss Robin Williams' suicide. "Sixty-three is so young," Shandling says. (The "Larry Sanders Show" star was 66 when he died.) At *Du-Par's*, a legendary restaurant and bakery on Third Street in LA, Shandling jokes: "What I want at my funeral is a boxing referee who can count to five and say, 'He's not getting up.'"

Shandling apparently found solace in Buddhism in recent years, yet in their existential musing, sadly, Shandling could come up with nothing but altruism in this life and Jerry, though sharply observant about obscurities of human behavior offered no wisdom about life beyond the material.

Death is one of life's sure certainties – for sure. We would generally, and quite rationally prefer to ignore it, to hide it away, and ultimately to escape it.

The real problem with death is its apparent finality. Ronald Dworkin, an American QC who held chairs at universities in London, Oxford and New York put it like this:

"Death's central horror is oblivion - the terrifying absolute dying of the light... Death has dominion because it is not only the start of nothing, but the end of everything."

Mortality to the closed mind proves to be good reason for despair.

Resurrection Hope

But, for Christians, because of Jesus, **the finality of death has been brought into question**. For those who open their hearts to the Easter message of the Bible, death no longer holds such ultimate horror. It is, in our belief, the pathway to new and eternal life.

Metaphorically speaking, death is the path we are encouraged to regard and seek in order to find our true life (death to self-centredness and sin that is). The benefits to others are extraordinary. When we live for the sake of others, with other Christians, the benefits reciprocate to us and far outweigh the cost of denying oneself (e.g. John 13:34-35).

But more than this, the assurance provided by the resurrection of Jesus - so boldly predicted in his own words and so boldly testified to by his first followers - undermines our ultimate fear.

While no one in their right mind looks forward to the process of death, the Christian faith declares that **death is not, as we think, necessarily the end**, but a beginning.

As we heard in the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, because of the work of Christ on the cross, the bible regards death as “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor 15:26). Jesus personally conquered the grave by his resurrection, and for all who unite with him in his death there is the promise of our own resurrection to eternal life. A new heaven and earth, at a time to come in God’s future, will usher in a new quality of life with God and with each other beyond the grave.

The Apostle Paul was so certain of the resurrection declared:

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55)

And so, for us this Easter, I invite you to join with the Apostle and with other Christians in this same resurrection hope.

The pattern Jesus gives to us is *life through death*.

The Apostle Paul made this clear when teaching the early church about the resurrection. He wrote:

“...Christ has indeed been raised from the dead... For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes (again), those who belong to him.”

(1 Corinthians 15:20ff)