

Bible Passage:

1 Corinthians 15

Message in brief:

How we think about death (and resurrection) affects how we live our lives now. If we believe that in death we are going to escape this wicked world for a better, non-material, spiritual one, then there is no need to care for creation now. But, if we believe that after our death God is going to complete the resurrection he started in Jesus, then we, as Christians, are called to build for that day.

We are going to look at two views of Death: One is the prevailing view within our culture (and most of our churches), the second is (I believe) biblical and built on the Judeo Christian heritage.

To understand the first we need to examine the prevailing world view in which we live. To do this we need to go back to Plato's cave. Plato argued that the material world is "vain shadows" of the spiritual world, which is far superior. Therefore spirit = good, matter = bad. Our job is to transcend this material world for the better, spiritual one beyond.

I used to imagine my soul as walnut-shaped and made of light, and that one day, when I die, it would escape my body and go straight to heaven. (i.e. platonic dualism). Then one day Jesus would return and judge the world, find it wanting and destroy it (allowing all the living souls who had prayed a prayer of commitment to exit to heaven just before). Heaven and Earth would be merged into a single place, where the spiritual "reality" would take precedent, and we would all worship God forever.

My guess is that most of you share, if not that view, one quite similar.

Yet this view is more informed by Plato and Greco/Roman thought than the Bible and the Hebrew scriptures.

So what?

Marx spoke of Religion as "the opium of the people", and in a sense, maybe he was right. If this world is "vain shadows", worthless, and the object is to transcend it, why engage in any political system or make any attempt to change it? Why oil the wheels of a machine that is driving off a cliff?

Platonic dualism has underpinned most of the theology of the last 100 years. Some American theologians have used it as a reason to drive bigger and bigger polluting cars and justify it before God - hastening in the end times when God is going to destroy it all anyway! Armageddon is coming. Who cares what state the planet is in? NO NO NO.

This is belief in a two stage process, earth then heaven.

The Second view starts from our theology of Creation; look at Genesis 1 - God made the world, and said "it is very good", fallen, yes, but still good.

God is not going to bin it, but rather regenerate it, through resurrection, of which Christ's resurrection was the "first fruits" - the future breaking into the present and bringing hope of what is to come.

Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. Then God will, in one last great act of creativity, bring heaven "down" to earth and unite the two, creating a new heaven and a new earth.

The Christian hope is a three stage process; life, death (including heaven and hell) then the final resurrection, with the new heaven and the new earth combined.

Not starting again, but transforming, regenerating, resurrecting. There is continuity and change, not destruction.

Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 6:14 of the future resurrection being a major motive for treating our bodies well in the present time.

“By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?”

A robust belief in the Jewish and Christian doctrine of death, and subsequent resurrection, gives more value to creation, (not less, as with Plato's dualism).

God's plan is not that we go to heaven, but that heaven comes to earth, and when it does (see revelation 21) death will be defeated for ever.

Jesus' death and resurrection is the “first fruits” of what is to come, the beginning of a new creation.

So what?

The death of Jesus, and his subsequent resurrection three days later, is the story of “God's kingdom being launched on earth as it is in heaven, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has been decisively defeated, the new creation has been decisively launched and Jesus' followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory and the inaugurated new world into practice. Atonement, redemption and salvation are what happens on the way as we work it out with the help of the spirit.” *Surprised by Hope, Tom Wright.*

Despite a thousand Easter hymns and a million Easter sermons, the resurrection narratives in the gospels never say anything like ‘Jesus is raised therefore there is life after death’, let alone ‘Jesus is raised therefore we shall go to heaven when we die.’ No, they say Jesus is raised therefore he is the Messiah, he is the world's true Lord, Jesus is raised so God's new creation begins – and we his followers have a job to do.

When Paul says in Philippians that we are “citizens of heaven”, he is not saying that when we're done with this life we'll be going off to live in heaven. What he means is that the saviour, the Lord Jesus is our king. We are His citizens now, not Roman citizens, or British citizens, but citizens of heaven, here now, with a job to do - to change the present situation. (not escape from it!).

To hope and work for a better world. To care for the poor, the sick, the lonely and depressed, for the slaves and the refugees, the hungry, the homeless, the abused, the down trodden, the despairing and in fact for the whole wide wonderful wounded world. This is not something extra, tacked on to a gospel that will get you to heaven when you die. It is the gospel.

What we do for the gospel will endure. Acts of justice, beauty and evangelism matter because, like Jesus' wounds, they will be part of God's resurrection future, part of the new heaven and earth that we pray and work for.

Evangelism has been traditionally presented as offering people a choice between a disembodied heaven or hell. Tick this box, not that. When the gospel is presented this way, no wonder we have a battle between faith and works. Rather the evangelist should announce that Jesus is Lord, he is Lord of all, he is Lord of your faith and he is Lord of your works. God's new world has begun.

What you do now matters, and what is good will last into God's future: Painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself - they are not simply ways of making this life less beastly or winning souls by being nice, they are God's kingdom work, being realized by his people who acknowledge Jesus as their Lord.

Christian Aid have it right when they say, we believe in "Life before death".

We pray "your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Our question should not be "What are we saved from?", but "What are we saved for?"