

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### What happens when life ends?

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! It's interesting how a person's early experiences of life shape the issues that become important to them. For me, some difficult times as a teenager raised questions that became very important to me. When I was 16 and 17, two good friends of my own age died. One was my next-door neighbour, who died of an asthma attack. A year later a school friend was severely burnt and died before he reached hospital. These two deaths were quite a shock. I had never been so close to death before.

As I grieved, I was confronted with questions. Now my two friends were dead, where were they now? Is there really life beyond death? What is the experience now of those who have died? How can I prepare for my own death? It's unusual, I know, for a teenager to dwell on these questions. But I'm glad I was confronted with reality.

Today I want to explore with you what I've learned about those questions. What does happen when life ends? What does the Bible, God's Word, tell us?

.....

Today we're addressing the question: 'What happens when life ends?' We know that when the Lord Jesus returns every person will be bodily raised to life to face the final judgment. Jesus said: 'The time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God's Son, and they will rise again. Those who have done good will rise to eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to judgment' (*John 5:28-29*). But what happens in the 'in-between' time, to people who die before Christ returns?

This question is very practical for us all, especially in times of bereavement. Many pastors and parents have been asked at the graveside, 'Where is Grandma now? What is she doing? Is she with Jesus already? Are she and Grandpa back together? Does she know what she's doing?' These questions are not the product of idle speculation or curiosity; they're of crucial importance to the person posing them. Unfortunately, many Christians today are confused and uncertain about how to give a helpful reply.

I recently watched a movie of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. In the movie the heroine dies at a young age, and the man who loves her asks her to stay with him in any form she chooses while he still lives. So she returns to him at times as a floating figure with her hand reaching eerily through his window. At the end of the movie she meets him and together they go to his room where he shoots himself and, presumably, they join each other in the afterlife. Could such a situation ever happen? Or is it just romantic imagination? What really happens on the other side of death?

The Bible tells us the fate of those who have not received God's love and forgiveness in Christ is very sobering. If we've spent our lives ignoring God and rebelling against his authority, when we die our spirit is separated from God's presence. God respects our choices, and if we have chosen to live independently from God, then after death God removes his love and mercy from us. If you haven't yet taken that step of turning from your sin and trusting in the Lord Jesus, can I encourage you to do so today? In prayer, thank Jesus that

he died for your sins on the cross. Receive his love and forgiveness. Accept his gift of eternal life. Tell him you want to live for him and follow his ways. That's the most important step in preparing yourself for death.

.....

Today we're thinking about what happens to people after they die. I'm hoping you've taken that step of receiving God's mercy through trusting Christ, and you've become a follower of Jesus. What will happen for you when you die? What happens to those you love, who have faith in Jesus, when they die?

The great news God has given us is that through the work of Jesus, his death for our sin and his mighty resurrection, God has won the victory over sin and over death. Jesus Christ is now the living Lord, the King who rules over all. Christians don't need to be afraid of death, or unsure about what will happen when we die.

The apostle Paul wrote to his Christian friends in Philippi, while he was in a prison cell. He didn't know whether he would be executed or released. Yet he wrote these stirring words, recorded in *Philippians 1*: 'To me, living is for Christ, and dying is even better. I really don't know which is better. I'm torn between two desires: Sometimes I want to live, and sometimes I long to go and be with Christ. That would be far better for me, but it is better for you that I live'. (*Philippians 1:21-24*)

Paul's faith was focussed on the Lord Jesus. He knew that if he kept living he would be living for Christ. If he died, his spirit would be immediately taken into the presence of Christ, with great joy. He was not afraid of death. He knew that he was in the hands of the victorious Lord, and his future beyond death was secure. We too have that same confidence, if we trust in Jesus.

Donald Barnhouse was a famous church minister. Sadly, his wife died, leaving him with young children to care for. He wanted to explain to his children where their mother was now. As he drove his children to his wife's funeral Donald stopped at traffic lights. Ahead of them was a huge truck. The sun was at such an angle that it cast the truck's shadow across the snow-covered field beside it. Donald pointed to the shadow and spoke to his children: 'Look at the shadow of that truck on the field. If you had to be run over, would you rather be run over by the truck or by its shadow?' The youngest child responded first: 'The shadow. It couldn't hurt anybody.' 'That's right', said Donald. 'And remember, children, Jesus let the truck of death strike him, so that it could never destroy us. Mother lives with Jesus now – only the shadow of death has passed over her.'

.....

Today we're considering what lies on the other side of death. This may not seem like a pleasant topic to think about, but it's vitally important for us all. We will all die, unless Christ returns while we're alive. It's important to prepare for your own death, and to know what has happened to those you love who are now dead.

As the apostle Paul says, dying means going to 'be with Christ' (*Philippians 1:23*). What's it like for Christians who have died, while they wait for the return of the Lord Jesus? While they wait they are in the form of a spirit, or soul (see *Revelation 6:9-11*), but when Christ returns they will be raised and given a wonderful new resurrection body (see *1 Corinthians 15:51-55*).

But while they wait, will they be conscious of what is happening, or will they be unconscious? That's an issue on which the Bible is not crystal clear. We read many times that those who die have 'fallen asleep' (e.g. *Acts 7:60*). Yet this expression 'falling asleep' seems to be a metaphor. Most of the Bible texts that refer to death seem to say that the spirits or souls of dead believers will be consciously aware of being with

Christ and being with those who have already died. Perhaps the idea of sleep is a way of emphasising the rest and peace that comes to those who no longer face sickness, pain, and trouble.

I heard of a Christian couple who lived in Queensland. During the last five years of the man's life he suffered from Parkinson's disease. He found it hard as an active and intelligent man to deal with his heavy muscles and slower thoughts. His wife cared for him until it was too difficult, then he was moved to a hostel. When he died his wife wrote him this poem. It expresses the Christian view of death in words of beauty and power. Here is part of the poem:

'For you it is morning, my darling. Silver spears of light pierce the dark night, heralding a great dawn. It opens up before your enraptured eyes vistas of which I can only dream. Gone is the helplessness of stiffened limbs, the dimmed mind, the vagueness, the uncertainty. Now images form bright and clear, sharp with perfect purity. Thought is swifter than light, and Oh...the sweet release, the lightness of spirit. For you, meeting Jesus face to face, the splendid handshake, moving into your new home, the glad greetings of loved ones already there. For you, it is morning, my darling, and therein lies my comfort.'

.....

What happens when a believer in Christ dies? He or she is ushered immediately into the presence of Christ in heaven, with the Christians who have died before and the holy angels (see *Hebrews 12:22-23*). The writer of the book of *Revelation* records these words he heard directly from God: 'Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on. They are blessed indeed, for they will rest from all their toils and trials; for their good deeds follow them!' (*Revelation 14:13*).

'Heavenly Father, thank you that your Son, the Lord Jesus, died for us and was raised from the grave. Through him you have defeated sin and death. Help us to look to Jesus Christ, our crucified Saviour and living King. Thank you for the confidence we can have, that when all who trust in Christ die, they are taken into the presence of the Lord Jesus, where they enjoy the riches of his love and care until Christ returns to set up the new eternal creation. Thank you. Amen.'