

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Life in the face of death

Presented by Chris Witts

The question in the newspaper advertisement caught my eye. "What if you live longer than you expect?". It was quite an intriguing question, and I discovered it was promoting superannuation. Then it quoted veteran entertainer George Burns who lived to be 100. George once said "If you live to the age of 100, you've got it made. Because very few people die past the age of 100!". That's a unique way of stating the obvious, isn't it .. but in today's society people are living longer. We have better medical facilities and we expect to live long enough to enjoy our retirement.

But why don't we talk more openly about the facts of death and dying? Are we afraid to mention the unmentionable? One thing's for sure, and that is each of us will die one day. Not a very comfortable thought, for sure, but it's the truth. No one gets off this planet alive, and death is inevitable. We find it difficult to talk about because of the pain it brings when a close friend or loved one dies. Death is an intruder, and a thief. Every instinct of the human heart recoils from it.

I believe God's Word the Bible is the best place to look for answers. In the pages of the Bible we find truth and comfort, to help us not be afraid of death.

Generally speaking, people don't like to talk about death. It's a taboo subject, one you don't usually bring up at a dinner party. But we need to face up to the reality that life itself is a journey that begins with birth and ends with death. Everyone is on a life journey, and we do have some control over what happens in this life. But we have no control over the moment of our death. The pastor and poet John Donne said "Death comes equally to us all and makes us all equal when it comes". The Bible says in Ecclesiastes 8:8 "No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no-one has power over the day of his death". We try to make light of it by saying "One day I'll kick the bucket" or "she gave up the ghost". There is fear, superstition and ignorance, and a reluctance to face it head on. Many atheists have popularized the idea that belief in immortality is the result of wishful thinking; most ancient people feared and dreaded the possibility of an after life. A colleague of mine conducted a graveside funeral service where, in the coffin, the family had placed a form guide, a copy of TV Week, and several other items he could enjoy as he made his journey. People have all kinds of ideas about what happens when we die.

Some people deny it altogether. Rather than admit that death is inevitable, they deny that it will ever happen to them. There was a cosmetic commercial on TV that urged women to defy the process of aging by using their product. Over and over again they used the phrase, "Defy it. Defy it," as if the inevitable could be avoided by using their product. Well, it might help disguise it, it might cover it up, but it will not cancel the appointment. We can do battle with the process of both aging and death cosmetically, but it is a battle we will ultimately lose.

Another common way people deal with the inevitability of death, is to delay it. This might be called the bridge attitude. They view death as a bridge that must be crossed somewhere, sometime down the road, a bridge they will cross when they get to it. Meanwhile, why worry? These people do not deny death or dread it, they simply resolve to put it out of their minds, taking it as it comes. Death is a bridge they will cross when they get to it.

So, what should our attitude as Christians be toward death? Are we to embrace death? Look forward to our death? Are we to be morbid in our outlook and lifestyles, only wearing black, and constantly inserting the topic in our conversations with others? The answer is obvious. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are about *life*, not death. Jesus has told us in John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full."

Henry Van Dyke said, "Some people are so afraid to die that they never begin to live." Facing the inevitable is something we all must do. By facing death properly, we can face life and invest our lives for Jesus Christ.

A five year old girl, returning home from the funeral of her grandmother, rode in a car with her other grandmother. "Where did Grandma go?" she asked. "We believe she went to be with God," the other grandmother replied.

"How old was she?" "She was eighty years old."

"How old are you?" "I am eighty-three."

The little girl thought a bit, and then said, "I hope God hasn't forgotten you!"

I don't think God has forgotten any of us when it comes to death. God knows that we all are going to die at some point, and that we are faced with this reality in some way within our minds. That's why He sent Jesus to explain to us what eternal life is all about. His Word says "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5)

The writer of the "Time" magazine back in November 1965 wrote an article called "Death As a Constant Companion". He was correct when he observed that facing our mortality is a constant challenge for us all. How do we cope when a fatal illness strikes a member of the family? How can life go on after a husband or wife dies? How do we prepare for the end of life's journey?

Hebrews 9:27 says, "Everyone must die once and after that be judged by God." Now, my guess is we'd like to change a word or two of that verse. We'd like it to say, "Nearly everyone must die." or "Everyone but me must die." or "Everyone who forgets to eat right and exercise and take his vitamins must die." But this is not what God says in His book. ALL of us die. Ecclesiastes 7:2 puts it this way, "We all must die and everyone living should think about this."

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book "The Denial of Death", Ernest Becker suggested that the primary concern of every living person is death, and most people deal with that concern by denying that it will ever happen to them. That reminds me of a story told of Lord Palmerston, one time Prime Minister in the United Kingdom. Seriously ill, his doctor told him the severity of the situation. He huffily replied, "Die, my dear doctor? That is the last thing I shall do!"

Even in our modern, secular society, every poll that is taken on the subject indicates that a substantial majority believe in some form of life after death. Is this belief merely wishful thinking arising from some evolutionary process that has produced a growing self-consciousness and a belief in our importance as beings at the top of the evolutionary scale? Or could it be that an eternal and loving God has given us this awareness because he longs to enjoy a relationship with us that will last forever? As the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, “He has set eternity in the hearts of men” (3:11).

According to my reckoning, there are about 147 statements by Jesus himself in the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - books that tell the story of his life and teaching in which he implies, or clearly states, that there is life after death. One of the reasons Christians believe in life after death is simply because God has said so—and done so most plainly.

Christians have a living hope that does not end with death but continues into an eternity with Jesus Christ our Lord. This hope is not wishful thinking; it is based on clear biblical teaching. After Lazarus had died, Jesus told Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever believes in me will never die” (John 11:25). When Christ rose from the dead, this living hope was clearly demonstrated and firmly established. Indeed, the resurrection of the crucified and buried Jesus is the foundation of the gospel and it was a constant theme of early preaching as recorded in the book of Acts. (See 1 Corinthians 15:12–58.)

The apostle Paul’s perspective of death can serve as a good model. Writing to the Philippians (1:21–26) he expressed the desire to die and be at home with Christ but then added that he was also willing to continue his ministry and wait until the Lord would call him into his eternal home. Some of the converts in the Thessalonian church were afraid that those who had died already would be neglected at the time of the Lord’s coming. He assured them that those who had died in Christ would rise first, and then those still alive at the Lord’s return would be caught up together with the believers of the past and be with Jesus forever (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). That was a comforting message.

The Christian hope of the resurrection is unique. Since death is an ever present reality, we will have many opportunities to talk about the hope we have. And so we should. Our living hope helps us come to terms with life and death.

It is healthy to grieve when a loved one is lost through death. People need to be encouraged to grieve. It is all right for a person to weep because of the loss of a spouse, child or someone else held dear. One-third of the Psalms have been classified as laments, as for example, Psalms 13 and 22. Reading the Psalms can help us in (1) squarely facing our loss and even complaining to God, (2) offering prayer, (3) recalling divine assurances, and (4) eventually reaching for praise. After hearing of the death of his son Absalom, King David showed his grief in loud cries of deep sorrow. We read in 2 Samuel 18:33: “The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: ‘O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If I had only died instead you. O Absalom, my son, my son!’ ”

Although grieving often takes longer than we expect, the ultimate hope of one day being in the presence of Christ, who told us that he is preparing a place for us, should make us homesick for the future when God shall wipe away all tears. In his famous sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis noted that we are on the outside of the glory awaiting us and declared: “We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the

leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so . . . The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last."

Through Christ the sting of death has been removed (1 Corinthians 15:50–58). Let us face death realistically and talk about it long before we die. Doing so will help those who are left to plan our funerals and to mourn our departure.

I would be surprised if you haven't been to a funeral service or had someone close to you die. It happens to all of us. Death enters our family, or a relative or work colleague dies. We hope that we will live to an old age before we die. In our society, death is thought of as the ultimate disaster, to be postponed as long as possible. For us, life, dominated as it is by the principle of acquisition, is a matter of "hanging on" for as long as possible.

In Psalm 90: 12, Moses prayed, "God, teach us how short our lives really are so that we may be wise." (Psalm 90:12) So, if we are wise we will remember the brevity of life. Exercise may buy us a few more heartbeats. Medicine may grant us a few more breaths. But in the end - there is an end. That is terrifying news but thankfully God has used David in Psalm 23 to remind us that we don't have to face that end alone. If we let Him, God and God alone can and will guide us through the valley of the shadow of death. Psalm 23:4 says "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and staff, they comfort me".

Years ago a chaplain in the French army used the 23rd Psalm to encourage soldiers before battle. He would urge them to repeat the opening clause of the psalm, ticking it off, one finger at a time. The little finger represented the word, THE; the ring finger represented the word LORD; the middle finger IS; the index finger MY; and the thumb, SHEPHERD. Then he asked every soldier to write the words on the palm of his hand and to repeat the verse whenever he needed strength. This chaplain placed special emphasis on the message of the index finger, MY. He reminded the soldiers that God is a PERSONAL shepherd with a PERSONAL mission - to get them home safely. A few days later after a fierce battle one of the young soldiers was found dead, and his right hand was still clutching the index finger of the left. As his life ended he clung to this comforting truth, "The Lord is MY Shepherd."

In the Italian city of Milan, there's an impressive cathedral that has a sculptured wreath of roses near the entrance. Underneath it says "*All that pleases us is only for a moment*". On the left is a sculptured cross of thorns with the words "*All that troubles us is only for a moment*". Then over the top are the words "*Nothing is important but that which is eternal*". How true, for our life needs to have the assurance that everything is worth it in the end. For one day, both the pleasures and pain of life here on earth will be over. The Bible says that God knows the exact moment when each person is to die. Psalm 139:16 says "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be". Job 14:5 says "Man's days are determined".

You would probably know that Hollywood actor Steve McQueen was the greatest movie star to ever appear on screen. He defined what being "cool" was (and is) and is imitated by today's major movie actors, but none comes close. There was only one Steve McQueen.

He became one of the richest and most sought-after superstars in the world. McQueen lived every day as if it was his last, and by doing so, he lived an extraordinary life, both on screen and off. Success filled his life until alcohol and a broken marriage left him unhappy and empty. You may not know he attended a Billy Graham crusade and gave his life to Jesus Christ. Billy Graham spent time with him and gave him his own Bible. He died an early death at the age of fifty on November 7, 1980, after suffering from mesothelioma, a rare and painful form of lung cancer. He had found peace with God before he died.

How wonderful it would be if we can be ready to face eternity with confidence and assurance that God will take us to be with Him. We all eventually experience the grief of losing a loved one. And we all know that one day we must face death ourselves. Even though we know that death means the start of a better life for believers, most of us shrink from the prospect of death.

St Francis of Assisi thought of death as a friend. In his hymn he wrote:

And thou most kind and gentle death,
Waiting to hush our latest breath,
O praise him, hallelujah!

But we do not *all* find that we can look at death that way. For most of us it would be more truthful to say that we regard death as the last enemy, not something to embrace, but rather something to do battle with. Death is scary, and we don't want our loves ones to die either.

It was back in 1967 that Arthur Stace died aged 83. He had no relatives and left his few possessions to the church. And yet this remarkable man had written the one word "eternity" almost one million times on the pavements of Sydney's streets. As a young man one night he heard John Ridley preach the words "I wish I could shout **Eternity!** through the streets of Sydney". God spoke to him, and I wonder how many thousands of people were challenged to consider their own lives through his one word "eternity".

St Francis of Assisi said "It is in giving that we receive; it is in loving that we are loved, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."

Lord, it is hard for us to consider our own mortality. We don't want to die, but You have given us a word of instruction that if we trust in You, all will be well. Thank you for the assurance of eternal life and a home prepared for us in Heaven. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.