

Good evening,

They say the Victorians never spoke about sex but were preoccupied talking about death.

Well if that's true, it seems to me today, we're pretty fascinated about Sex, but we never speak about death.

If you have a look at Cosmo magazine (actually – don't) there are dozens of articles on sex – but none on death
And if you try to buy a copy of “death weekly” or “death for dummies”, or “good-bye” magazine – they don't exist!

No-one has yet written a leading article entitled “50 things about death you never knew”.

We can talk about sex forever – but we don't want to talk about physical death which really is forever.

In fact surely the most important question in the world is

“what happens when we die”?!

what happens to me, when I pop my clogs, kick the bucket, or shuffle off this mortal coil?

What happens to me?

Do I just disappear or do I live on?

Does what I do 'here' affect 'there'?

Am I conscious or am I asleep?

What happens to me and what will it be like?

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul answers these questions

He answers them because

they absolutely matter to us,

they are the most important questions in the world

they change the way we live.

So if you haven't already, would you find a Bible and turn with me to 1 Corinthians Chapter 15 p1156

I want to talk about

The Reality of Death and Life

The Key to Death and Life; and

Our Response to Death and Life

3 ideas, the reality, the Key and our Response to Death and Life.

1. Let's begin with the Reality.

Well, the Bad News is 'we're all going to die –

Its called the ultimate statistic: “I out I of die”.

Woody Allen said “I don't mind dying so long as I don't have to be around when it happens”.

But actually he does (and so do we!)

So not talking about death is about as clever as sticking your head in the sand when a Rhinoceros is charging your backside!

You may not see it coming – but you'll certainly know about it when it hits you!

We don't talk about death!

Perhaps the reasons is because its not a very cheery subject

Someone wrote to me this week saying: “*EVEN in the face of death, when someone they loved has died, my friends STILL try to make light of it...*”

Perhaps it's because we have moved death outside of our everyday experience.

*In the 17th Century life expectancy was about 40 - (giving birth to more than 10 children was not uncommon – but a 1/3 would die by the age of one, and another 1/3 before they reached 16 (can you imagine burying 6 of your children?),
it used to be that if someone got ill or grew frail they would be cared for by the family, all the family, and therefore people's mortality was never very far from everyday experience.*

*Today, life expectancy grows every year, infant mortality is less than ½ % and we can expect to live beyond 80
Today if someone gets ill they go to hospital,
Today, if someone becomes frail they are cared for in a special home.
So mortality is distanced from our everyday experience
And so it's a shock **to us** when people die!*

Perhaps it's because, if death is all there is, then life for many is a sick joke.
For there is no justice for the 'exploited poor' (who are the majority of the world's population)
there is no justice for you if you die young, or suffer life-long or if you're betrayed or abused or cheated!
If death is all there is, then there is no justice and so Dylan Thomas is right,
*we should not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rage at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light!*

Perhaps it's because, if death is all there is then there is no hope, it is an extinguishing of everything we are and everything we love
So Death is not just theory
It is a reality and it is totally personal

So even though we don't talk about it,
it **STILL REMAINS** the most important question in the world.
Even though you don't want to think about it
It **IS** going to take you -
So what **will** happen to you when you die?
Will you be judged?, will you live on?
AND does what you **do** 'here', what you **decide** 'here', affect forever?

That's why Paul says in Chapter 15v3
For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:
Of first important, of first importance, of **ULTIMATE** importance.
This what we need to know!

*that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,
that he was buried,
that he was raised and
that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve, and then to more than five hundred (who are still alive!) and
then to James and to all the apostles and then to me too.*

This is of first importance!
Because (Paul says) we **KNOW** that death is not the end
There is more, there is life, there is resurrection!

v35 says "But someone will ask, "How, how are the dead raised?"

how can my body be reassembled – especially if some of the molecules that live in me – are currently residing in someone else

how will I be resurrected – will I be at my physical peak of 25, or my mental peak of 35, or my emotional peak which so far hasn't made it past 14?

how?

Well, says Paul v37

*The body that is sown is perishable, is raised imperishable;
it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory;
it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;
it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*

In other words there is a completely different dimension to existence.

It is “spiritual”.

It is just as real as the “physical”,

But it is “spiritual” - the dimension of God.

It is eternal,

What we see, touch, taste, smell, hear – are limited to our 3 dimensions

there are other dimensions beyond the ‘here and now’

We know this true, says Paul, because “we have seen it, and touched it and experienced it”.

THIS IS OF FIRST IMPORTANCE

There **IS** a resurrection

it takes the perishable and makes it permanent

it takes our hormone driven desires, our flawed upbringing, our base instincts – and reaches far beyond them into glory

it takes our limitations and replaces them with the power of God

it takes the physical and transforms it to spiritual

v44, if there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

This is of first importance!

Because, now

we can say to the ‘poor exploited’, you can have the Kingdom of Heaven

we can say for those who die young, you can have forever

we can say to those who suffer, there **IS** so much more than this

we can say to those who are betrayed there **IS** justice

we can say to all who die – death is but a shadow

Do you see?

We know that Death and Spiritual Life is a reality

God has promised it, Jesus has proved and people have seen it

This is of first importance!

So secondly,

2. What is the Key?

Because what we decide on Earth really does affect our eternity

What we deliberately ‘let go’ on Earth we lose forever

But what we bind to ourselves now is secure in God for all time.

So it matters, this talk matters!

For if, in our struggle to keep hold of life, Death wins (death always wins)

if Death has the Victory over all of us

if death is the **wound**, then the **poison**,
that which *really* kills us / that which we really **need** to be afraid of, is sin.
A Scorpion may wound us with its sting but it is its poison which kills.
The puncture wound of the Scorpion's tail is nothing in comparison to the liquid death
it injects into our system.

Death will take us all – our bodies will die,
but if that is all there is then, there is no fear in that!
because as Paul has already said –
Eternal life replaces mortal life,
an Imperishable body takes over from a decaying body
the power of God is more glorious than the power of the flesh!
v51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of
an eye, at the last trumpet.
For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable,
and we will be changed.

No-one fears trading in a clapped out bicycle for a shiny new red Ferrari.
We may have loved our bike, but let's be honest pedalling up-hill is nothing in comparison to the joy of putting
your foot down, with the wind in your hair (believe me I know what I am talking about!)

The wound of death is painful,
but it is nothing, to the poison contained in its sting.
because the sting of death is sin –
what really hurts us when we die is the reality of our SIN.

For if we NEED justice for this world to be right
if we NEED justice for this world to make sense – and we do
If we NEED Justice because God is God,
and God cannot possibly let **injustice** go unpunished,
selfishness go without penalty

then for Justice to happen there must be judgement.
There must be Judgement
Everyone must be judged!

And if we are Judged against God's good laws, his perfect principles, his commands of generous love
and we are found wanting, (which we all will be)
then we are stuffed!

Listen, if our whole life we have *chosen* to keep God at a distance – if that IS our hearts desire, then God will
honour that!

If our whole life our motives, our words, our actions – have been motivated by selfishness, a me-first mentality
– both obviously and buried deep
then that sin, that falling short, cannot go without penalty.
Our deliberate choices disqualify us from God' presence,
kills us stone dead.

Don't fear death, fear Sin!
Don't fear dying, fear Judgement!
fear being afraid to come before God's perfect gaze forever,

fear our choice to separate ourselves from him
fear a prison made of our own fears called hell.

BUT God offers you a key

For in Jesus, (who is the Key)

v54 *"Death has been swallowed up in victory."*

"Where, O death, is your victory?"

"Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God!

He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, the small wound of death is healed for his resurrection is proof of victory over death.

George Herbert, said "before his resurrection Death was seen as an executioner – now it is just a gardener"

In Jesus, death is no longer something to be feared
for we know its wound will be healed

But more powerful and than this is:

in Jesus' the poison of sin is neutralised.

If it is true, for Justice to be done – injustice must not go unpunished

If it is true that you and I are shot through with sin

Then what we need is **a blood transfusion**,

What we need is God himself, to take the hit:

to give us his innocence and take our guilt.

What we need is for Jesus to take the punishment of separation from God for us.

Dr Donald Barnhouse was driving his children home after the funeral service of his wife.

They were overcome with grief and Dr Barnhouse was trying hard to think of some words to give to his children.

Then a long truck passed them. And as it did so, its shadow swept over the car, and an idea came to him.

Children, he said, "would you rather be run over by a truck or by its shadow?"

"The shadow", they replied, "that can't hurt us at all".

So Dr Barnhouse said, "Did you know that 2000 years ago the truck of death ran over Jesus....so that only its shadow might run over us now".

The sting of death has been neutralised

The wound has been healed

which means that if you would restore God as God in your life

if you would find him then grace and mercy are yours *guaranteed*.

And that makes a difference!

On holiday in France when we were shopping in some shopping centre they stabled your shopping bag together and gave you a receipt.

It meant that if you were stopped by security guards which were, and they asked you what you were doing with all those clothes you could hand over the receipt – its says "its OK it's all been paid for".

When you're wandering around in France, and you're stopped by a security man who is roughly as wide a garage door – and your ability to say “its all right it has been paid for” in French is just as likely to come out as “your Mother is a Chicken”. Having the receipt is might reassuring!

In Jesus, not only do we know that the wound of death will be healed; BUT also the poison of sin neutralised; which means he has guaranteed our destiny

And tonight you get to decide if that is what you want:
God as God
You as his child
Your destiny with him forever.
because (thirdly)

3. Your Response makes a difference!

You see, for tonight to make a difference, you have to actually believe it.

I don't mean 'believe it' in the way that we believe that Saturn has pretty rings, which is true but totally irrelevant to most things I can think of.

And I don't mean 'believe it', in the way that we believe “this means that good triumphs over evil” – which is great to know but again just too remote, too theoretical to make a difference

I mean 'believe it' as in really 'believe it'
I mean 'believe it' as in taking the truth and applying it, consciously, prayerfully to how we live.

Tom Homewood said to me this week “*Can you believe that we're on our way to heaven, Steve? It's just incredible*”.
yeah it is!

And it can make an incredible difference to our life.
Pauls says
v58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you.

3.1 Stand Firm

Stand Firm – because there will be times in your life when part of you will wish that you weren't a Christian and you just want to give up.

When you're finding the going tough – and those around you make fun of your faith and insult your beliefs, and intimidate you so that you feel you have no answers –
stand firm

When someone you respect falls into sin,
when your fellow Christians are the most annoying people on the planet,
when you get hurt by someone in church and nothing seems to speak to you anymore
stand firm

stand firm – when thoughts take hold of your imagination that would grieve God,
I think David described them once like little bush-fires springing up,
if you let them take hold, they will consume you –
so don't let your imagination dwell on them, stamp them out, stand firm.

When you're thinking about how much you've *been hurt* by someone,
how rightly offended you are,
how they have been 'so mean' to you and
that thought goes around and around in your head so that it begins to sour you
stamp on it, stand firm

When you find yourself fantasising about some *erotic encounter*, and your imagination wants to run with it
jump on it, stamp it out, stand firm

When you're tempted to think how *useless you are*,
how worthless you are,
how unlovable you are
jump on that idea, stamp on it, stand firm

Look at who you are, in Jesus : "you are eternally loved",
look at **what** you **have**: You have God and God has you, and although we experience that fairly remotely
sometimes, one day he will so close to wipe every tear from your eyes (he promises you that)
look at **what** you are "you are a Son / a Daughter of
'The God Who Made The Universe'"
To be honest they don't come more valuable, more precious, more noble, more loved than YOU!
That's what this truth means!

You have a hope that is worth

- more than all the applause of the world,
- more than all the gold in the world,
- more than all the possessions, all the relationships, or status' in the world.

But this truth is useless unless you believe it – unless you really believe it!

So stand firm

v58 and always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,
because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

3.2 Give yourself fully to the work of the Lord

Not just to the Lord – in some remote, theoretical, passive way.

Give yourself fully to the work of the Lord.

Commit!

give your time, your money, your life, your priorities to God

WHY?

because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

the reason why so many of you work all the hours God sends is not because you love being tired,
is not because you like being on call, or planning talks, or getting your hands dirty –
the reason why is because through you God build's his Kingdom in other people's lives!

the reason why the Sunday School teachers get up so early,

spend Saturday Night planning lessons and cutting out paper models is not because they have nothing better to do with their time!

Its because through them God sows seeds in young lives that will grow and bring eternal life!

The reason why people give their money, serve in the background, pray into the night, work until they are tired, talk about Jesus even when its scary – is because they know that their labour is not in vain.

But also

As you give yourself to God – so you see more and more how he has given himself to you!

The reason why you work for God is not just for others – its for you too!

You want to know how to find God more – serve him!

You want to see the blessing of God in your life – give yourself to him!

You want to be part of this church, feel you belong, not be overlooked, – throw yourself into our mission!

As you give – you receive!

That is THE Golden rule of Christian living.

Counter-intuitive I know – but it works!

As you give – so you realise that the God of Heaven is smiling on you

And that knowledge

melts bitterness, fills us with security and develops our compassion

Bill Giles wrote this to me this week. He said

Hi Steve, I can't sleep so I thought I'd write...

Tonight's discussion is very scary - and you are right - there are no gray scales.

You are either in or out,

for it or against it,

believe or disbelieve,

commit or deny.

If one believes, as one must, then it cannot but impact on everything one does.

*I have only returned to the church in the last year but it has made a huge impact on my life, and that of my family. I am sure that if the news tomorrow said World Peace, Cure for Cancer, Heart Disease Eradicated, then all of these **would be nothing to my comfort and security in Jesus** (and I can barely believe that those are my own words).*

Sorry to embarrass you Bill,

But he's right!

Nothing compares to the comfort and security in Jesus that operates in this world AND beyond.

And if you would have it then you need to believe it.

I mean commit to believing it

I mean apply the belief to your life

to stand firm in the face of opposition

be it your own doubts, your own desires or other peoples pressure

and give yourself fully to the work of the Lord.

For anything you do for God is never in vain!

