

WAY OF DISCIPLESHIP: BECOMING LIKE CHRIST



Session 5: Becoming like Christ in difficult times: choosing hope and honesty in the battles of life – part one.

Should life be easy for a disciple who is becoming like Christ?

What does God say will ultimately happen to His whole creation?

What happens to me after death?

How might I personally experience life after death?

Why can I be confident in the resurrection?

How do disciples see death?

Should life be easy for a disciple who is becoming like Christ?



As we have seen, to be a disciple of Christ is to live in a covenant relationship with God, who is love. Unlike the false idols that surround us, God offers us forgiveness, grace, a sense of identity and purpose, and wants to restore us to be fully human.

But becoming a disciple will not necessarily make life easier. As one writer puts it, "...the Scriptures teach us that there is no path to God that does not pass through the wilderness. The God of the Bible is the God of the desert." (David Runcorn)

There are at least four good reasons why in some ways the fact that 'life is difficult' can intensify in the adventure of being a disciple.

You are now a 'new creation' - open to God changing you from the inside out. God's desire is to make our characters holy – set apart to become more like Him. Through the forgiveness of the cross we have been made "perfect forever" as a once for all act. (Hebrews 10:14) But the same verse from Hebrews also says that throughout our lives we are "being made holy" as who we are becomes more and more like Christ.

This is a process which involves increasingly being able to allow God to be in control.

You are now seeking what He wants in the world above everything else – which can put you in conflict with your own instinctive desires (what the Bible calls the "flesh") – and with some of the values which surround you (what the Bible calls "the world").

You are now engaged in the spiritual battle between good and evil. Ultimately the presence of sin in the world, and in each of us, will be totally removed when Jesus finally makes "His enemies His footstool".



But while we long for that to be complete as disciples we join with God's kingdom in confronting evil. As Jesus warned, for some throughout history (and many in the world today) that will include experiencing persecution.

Two Iranian Christians, Maryam and Marziyeh, were arrested in 2009 for their faith. They were blindfolded, interrogated and taken to court. The lawyer asked whether they regretted becoming Christians, to which they replied, 'We have no regrets.' The lawyer stated, 'You should renounce your faith verbally and in written form.' He said they could return after a period in prison to think about their options, returning when they were ready to comply. But they responded, 'We have already done our thinking.'

And you are not immune to the common sufferings of being human, as we wait for the completion of God's victory.



In this session we explore how discipleship means becoming like Christ *through* difficulties, not *despite* them.

An American woman called Nancy is crippled and confined to a wheelchair, yet she has embraced a stunning vocation. Nancy runs adverts in the personal section of her local newspaper that read: "If you are lonely or have a problem, call me. I am in a wheelchair and seldom get out. We can share our problems with each other. Just call. I'd love to talk." The results have been amazing. Each week at least thirty people contact Nancy and she spends her days counselling and comforting people. When asked how she became crippled she replied that she had tried to commit suicide! She went on to explain,

"I was living alone. I had no friends. I hated my job, and I was constantly depressed. I decided to jump from the window of my apartment, but instead of being killed I ended up in the hospital paralysed from my waist down. The second night I was there Jesus appeared to me and told me that

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I'd had a healthy body and a crippled soul but from then on I would have a crippled body and a healthy soul. I gave my life to Christ right there and then."

When I got out of the hospital I tried to think of how a woman like me in a wheelchair could do some good, and I came up with the idea of putting the ad in the newspaper. And the rest, as they say, is history."

As we grow as disciples we can also grow in knowing how to react when times are difficult, in our understanding of suffering and death, and in our response to God. We can increasingly grow in responding to difficulties as Jesus did.

He was a "man of sorrows" and "acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), but He was also the "pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:2) – the greatest example of how to respond to suffering. Like Nancy, we can become those whom God is able to use and transform in the midst of difficulty.



We will see how to become like Christ in suffering by looking through two lenses:

As we finish this module, **we will be formed as people who live in hope of resurrection.** It was through hope, because of the "joy set before Him" that Christ was able to "endure the cross".

It is as we grasp the beauty of God's ultimate destiny for us, and all creation, that we can truly start to live as disciples in the here and now.

By "fixing our eyes on Jesus", **specifically looking at how Jesus, and early Christians, met suffering, evil and death,** we can be shaped as people who "will not grow weary and lose heart".

What does God say will ultimately happen to His whole creation?



Any journey you go on is shaped by the destination. As we navigate the joys and challenges of life as disciples, having a vision of life after death, the meaning of resurrection, the defeat of evil and suffering, and God's ultimate purpose is essential in helping us to live in the present – particularly in difficult times.

While there are many aspects of God's future that are naturally beyond our understanding and imagination, there are clear directions God has revealed to us that we can hope in. He wants us, as His covenant-partners and children, to have a "hope which doesn't disappoint us." (Romans 5:5) Paul writes, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope." (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

In some senses Christian hope is a *mystery*, but it is not a *guess*. Before we look at the individual hope we have beyond death, seeing the big picture of God's plan will help us understand how our ultimate destiny is found within the future hope for everything God has made and wants to restore.

The first wonderful and important truth about ultimate hope is that **it must make sense of the whole story of Bible.**

For example, however we understand Jesus' rising from the dead, or our own experience of life after death, the more it completes the direction the whole story of the Bible and the mission of Jesus has been moving in, the more we can have confidence in it. (We look in more detail at this big picture story in module 4.) In brief, the whole story of the Bible can be seen as God's plan to reunite God's space (heaven) with human beings' space (earth).

The crucial thing is that 'heaven' in the Bible is not so much an other-worldly place we go to when we die, but a way of saying 'wherever God is fully present'.

It also points to an unseen spiritual landscape which is full of all kinds of angelic creatures.

From the beginning the picture we are given is that God wanted to be dwelling with human beings completely – for heaven and earth to be one. These two dimensions overlapping in the same space in a life-giving, harmonious relationship.

Yet, as we have seen, the choice of human beings to decide that they have the "knowledge of good and evil", replacing God, has led to the chaos and dysfunction of sin we can see throughout history, and in our own hearts.

Crucially it seems that some of the spiritual beings belonging to this unseen heavenly kingdom also made the same choice – choosing to turn from God in rebellion.

This is why Jesus' victory over the powers on the cross was so necessary. So this fall results in brokenness at all levels – spiritual, human, and even in creation.





Heaven and earth were violently separated. The story of the world, and in the Scriptures, is that God is working to bring heaven and earth together. To reverse the effects of the fall, defeat evil, and restore human beings to their original purpose – to work alongside Him in His creation.

Throughout the Bible God longs for the day when “You will be my people, and I will be your God.” The Old Testament is the story of God seeking to bring heaven back to earth through a covenant people, who meet Him in the Temple – the one place in which heaven and earth can touch. This is why the Temple was decorated like a restored Garden of Eden.

But it is through Jesus, who united God and humanity in Himself again, that God began to reunite heaven and earth. This is why when Jesus arrived John proclaimed, “The kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.” This is why John wrote that Jesus was like a moveable temple (tabernacle), living among us.

Wherever Jesus went, he brought the kingdom of heaven to earth, restoring what was broken, and through the cross became the ultimate temple sacrifice which broke down the barrier between God’s space and us (this was why the curtain in the centre of the Jerusalem temple which was meant to separate us from God’s presence was ripped in two when Jesus died (Matthew 27:51)).

We are still waiting for this reunion between heaven and earth to be complete. This is the Christian hope. At the end of the Bible, the poetic images in the book of Revelation point us towards this, painting strong images of the defeat of evil, and ultimately promising a renewed creation.



The age of sin and death is over and God’s space and humanity’s space completely overlap once again. There will come a ‘Day of the Lord’ when the Saviour we eagerly await from heaven (Philippians 3:20) will return to free the world from corruption, completely defeating evil by judging with justice, and restoring us.

The rivers will clap their hands and the mountains will sing for joy that their liberator has finally come (Psalm 98:8; Romans 8:21-22). He will not be ‘out for blood’ but will judge evil through the power of His own shed blood – the power of self-sacrificial love. God always planned that in Jesus He would not “condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:17)

He will make “all things new” (Revelation 21:5) – new in the sense of not being a completely different thing, but a restored and renewed version of something that already exists.

Because the destination always shapes the journey, there are some important aspects to the picture of ultimate destiny that matter now and can sometimes be misunderstood.



It shows that our ultimate end is not to 'go to heaven when we die' or that we will not be taken off the earth to go to 'heaven'.

If God makes a covenant with His people and creation, and sent Jesus to bring heaven to earth, the idea that ultimately He wants us to be with Him in a purely spiritual heavenly existence, removed from the earth, would be a departure from the story, not the completion of it. God would be untrue to Himself - breaking His promises and reversing the mission of Christ.

The language and ideas of being removed from anything earthly to be in heaven has found its way into Christians' imagination from early Greek philosophers. They believed that human beings could only be truly free by existing in an entirely spiritual realm.

An image Paul uses in one of His letters has encouraged some Christians to reinforce this by understanding God's plan as to snatch us away from the earth to be with Him. (This has been popular since the 1830s when it gained prominence.) Paul writes how when Christ returns "... we who are still alive and are left will be caught up ... in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

Interpreting this as a 'Great Escape' is a problem for two reasons. Firstly, as we have seen, it makes no sense of the big picture story of heaven and earth being reunited.

But secondly, the image Paul is using is comparing Jesus' return to that of a Roman conqueror, returning victoriously to his home. When this happened, people would welcome him back by going outside the city and lining the streets to applaud him on his way in.

In the same way Paul is saying we will be so eager to receive Jesus as He restores the earth, that we shall go out to greet Him and welcome His return.

It shows that ultimately God does not want to bring about the "end of the world".

Linked to the idea that we 'go to heaven when we die' is the vision that God will ultimately destroy the earth.

Again, while this makes no sense of the biblical story, a passage in one of Peter's letters about the day of the Lord needs looking at: "...the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire...The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare....Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" (2 Peter 3: 6-7; 10-12)

Here, Peter is not talking about complete destruction, but the hope that God's return will completely purify His world - laying bare all the injustice, pain, sin, evil and brokenness - and dealing with it once and for all.

This is why he compares God's ultimate judgement with the flood at the time of Noah, when God did not totally destroy His creation, but dealt with its corruption - following which He made a covenant never to 'destroy' it again.

This is also why immediately after this Peter writes, "But in keeping with his (God's) promise we are looking forward to a renewed heaven and a renewed earth, where righteousness dwells." (2 Peter 3: 13). As Christians we look forward to "the life of the world to come."





This matters because the picture we have of God's ultimate future completely shapes our discipleship today.

If we believe that the world will be destroyed and that our final aim is to escape to heaven this has potentially disastrous results.

We might stop caring for the earth because we believe it has no long-term future anyway.

We might think God is only interested in the "spiritual" parts of our lives – because these are the only things that ultimately matter – rather than the everyday work we do.

We might not experience God when we are not engaged in "spiritual" pursuits.

We might think that church callings matter to God more than other callings because they are more "spiritual".

We might not value the fact that we are physical creatures with the gift of bodies, which God rejoices in, because we think that one day we will just be some kind of "spirits".

Instead, the Christian hope for a reunited heaven and earth opens up a vision of life in which everything we do now matters.

God will take everything we do in line with His kingdom into the future.

Tom Wright puts it, "What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself—will last into God's future.

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These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether. They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom.”

Or as another writer says, "...the noble products of human ingenuity...will form the 'building materials' from which (after they are transfigured) 'the glorified world' will be made." (Miroslav Volf).

We will explore the day to day implications for living out our discipleship in the world God wants to restore in module 3.



What happens to me after death?



There are many things we can only dream of when thinking about life after death. One of the best pictures the Bible gives to describe it is as a banquet, and Paul writes, “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” – the things God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9)

Yet even while he is saying that there are many questions we can only speculate about, in the same letter Paul offers clear pointers to the kind of existence God invites us into, (he does not want us to be uninformed) and the reasons we can hope in it.

As we have seen, our understanding of life after death must make sense of the whole story of the Bible. But the clearest lens we can look through is Jesus’ own resurrection. Because He is the one who has first broken the power of death, He is the pattern, the “firstfruits’ of those who have fallen asleep.” Paul promises that “in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” (1 Corinthians 15: 20-23) What happens to Christ, then happens to everyone.

In other words, looking at the whole Bible story, and the nature of Jesus’ resurrection is the best way of understanding what happens to us after we die.

The promise is that after death human beings (and all creation) will be given **a new existence in which we will be “raised imperishable;** (we can’t die again)...in glory...in power...raised a spiritual body.” (1 Corinthians 15: 42-44)

We are promised that we **will see God “as He is”** (1 John 3:2), with our covenant-relationship finally restored: “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (Revelation 21:3)

All evil, death and sin will have been completely dealt with “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4) because Jesus will have finally “destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” (1 Corinthians 15: 24,27)

As a result, God will be “all in all”. (1 Corinthians 15:28) God’s presence will fill once again fill a renewed heaven and earth: “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light...” (Revelation 21: 22-24)





In other words, this is the **completion of God's desire** throughout the whole Bible to bring together His space and ours – to reconcile all things to Himself again. (Colossians 1:20)

As the famous hymn puts it, “But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture, And myriad, myriad human voices sing, And earth to heaven, and heaven to earth, will answer: At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is King.”

With the end of evil, just as there will no longer be any barrier between God and people, so too the removal of sin means that **any division between human beings caused by war, tribe, racism, conflict or suspicion will be completely removed.**



After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9)

The wounds of history are healed and human divisions gone.

While in a general sense there is the promise that resurrected people will see and know each other – completely – family reunification is not the main focus. (This has been a popular version of life after death, particularly since Victorian times.) Rather, in the joy of complete unity with and under God, everyone who lives in that light is part of a glorious, eternal family, holding out tremendous promise for those for whom their earthly families have been a source of grief or pain.

Resurrection promise is **a restoration of original relationship, but also of our original calling.** The Bible begins with God seeking covenant-partners who will work with Him to look after and develop His creation. Logically, it ends with human beings recovering the dignity of this image of God in us, being able, once again, to take part in ruling over God's renewed creation.

There are several pointers to this. In a parable, Jesus describes how the work that we do in this life can lead to God entrusting us with work in the life to come: “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!’” (Matthew 25:23)

Peter writes that we will receive the authority of those who rule: “...when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.” (1 Peter 5:4)

Jesus promises His disciples: “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones...” (Matthew 19:28)

In many ways, our work now is merely preparation for the eternal restoration of the task God made us for.



How might I personally experience life after death?



When we look more specifically at what Jesus' resurrection reveals about the kind of existence each of us might experience, it is not surprising that it is consistent with this vision of hope.

It is clear that the risen Jesus was not just walking around in His human body brought to life again. While it was recognisably Him, it was what Paul calls a 'resurrection body' – an existence in which His physical humanity and heavenly existence were now both fully brought together. A body in which death and sickness no longer could exist because the sting of death has been removed.

This is why His resurrection existence is the "firstfruits" – what happened to Him, is the prototype of heaven and earth being reunited completely.

It is also the only place we can look to begin to see what our post-death existence will be. As Paul says, "...so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man...we will all be changed... For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality." (1 Corinthians 15: 49-53)

This is a physical and heavenly existence in a body suited to be with God, and partner with Him, in a renewed heaven and earth. We will be similar, but also changed.

For example, we can see that Jesus was still recognisable – the disciples knew who He was – but as both earthly and heavenly He was significantly different – people didn't always recognise Him straight away.

We can see that His wounds were still visible, but rather than being signs of pain and shame, they were evidence of His glory. This points to a resurrection existence in which who we are becoming in our lives now will be relevant in the future, and also, more wonderfully how in resurrection God may change some of our deepest hurts into parts of us that bring Him glory.

We can see that He has physical qualities (He could eat fish!) but also heavenly ones – He could appear in a locked room. This kind of heavenly/earthly resurrection existence is exactly what we would expect as an outcome which completes the whole story of the Bible, and the life, death and victory of Christ.

The full joy and beauty of it is hard to visualise, so a handout includes a fictionalised vision of this resurrection existence, which is faithful to the evidence we have to inspire our imaginations!



What happens if I die before the final resurrection?



An important clue to know about life after death is that the Bible talks about two stages we experience.

Whereas the resurrection is described as God's ultimate plan, to be completed when all things are fulfilled, those who have already died are said to have "fallen asleep in Christ".

This is a temporary state until the end – as Paul says, "...we will not all sleep (in other words, for ever), but we will all be changed." (1 Corinthians 15:51)

So there are two stages – this is why we talk about "Resting in Peace" and "Rising in Glory".

We could describe the resurrection as 'life after life after death'.

The experience of 'sleep' can of course be one in which you have no idea how long it has gone on. Perhaps the Bible is just giving us an assurance that on the other side of death, before resurrection, is rest.

In his first letter, Paul even promises that those who have fallen asleep will be raised first: "...we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.... and the dead in Christ will rise first." (1 Thessalonians 4: 14-16)



Why can I be confident in the resurrection?



There are things in our natural experience that can help us trust in the promise of resurrection:

The longing we have for the world to be put right in the world.

The way in which we can experience death as stealing something from us.

The way when we see something beautiful it can create a longing in us for complete Beauty.

The way death and resurrection occur as part of the natural world.

But for Paul, it was clear that it was only the fact of Christ's resurrection which could be the basis for trusting that God's plan to bring earth and heaven together, and that Christ is the Lord who has defeated sin and death. "...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15: 17-19)

While the cross gives comfort, it is the resurrection that gives hope – that heaven has come to earth, and that we can live in God's kingdom from today. N.T. Wright puts it like this: "...the bodily resurrection of Jesus isn't a take-it-or-leave-it thing, as though some Christians are welcome to believe it and others are welcome not to believe it. Take it away, and the whole picture is totally different.

Take it away, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring the problems of the material world. Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is a wish-fulfillment religion. Take it away, and Friedrich Nietzsche was probably right to say that Christianity was a religion for wimps....

"...The resurrection of Jesus doesn't mean, 'It's all right. We're going to heaven now.' (It means) God is now in charge, on earth as in heaven. And God's 'being-in-charge' is focused on Jesus himself being king and Lord. The title on the cross was true after all. The resurrection proves it."



It is clear that something dramatic happened in history that had the power to turn a small and local story in a backwater of the Roman Empire into a global movement within a few decades. Yet Jesus' resurrection was as unexpected and beyond the understanding of the early Christians as it is for us.

This is why the New Testament wants to give its readers the confidence to live as disciples of a risen Lord through offering rational evidence – when it comes to the resurrection, we are not expected to have blind faith, but reasonable trust.

There are twelve recorded appearances of Jesus to His disciples after the resurrection (see handout). For Paul, this was of "first importance": "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." (1 Corinthians 15: 3-7)

By emphasising twice that this was "according to the Scriptures" he is making the point that the resurrection completes and makes sense of the whole story.

The handout 'Jesus: Lord or legend?' unpacks some of the arguments against this evidence. Objections have centred around three ideas:



Jesus was not really dead.

Not many people give much credibility to this argument. As Tom Wright says, "Jesus didn't really die - someone gave him a long drug that made him look like He was dead, and he revived in the tomb. Answer: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people, and no disciple would have been fooled by a half-drugged, beat-up Jesus into thinking he'd defeated death and inaugurated the kingdom."

The disciples were deliberately lying, joining together to make up a religion to honour their rabbi.

The fact that there is no evidence for this is important. But, as time went on, and Christians were put to death for their belief in the resurrection, it is also hard to understand the motive for lying in the face of such persecution, or why not a single one of them deserted or withdrew their story.

In addition, as a made-up story there are so many aspects of it that would have been offensive to first-century Jewish people - not least that a human being could be a crucified God.

Finally, if it were genuinely a lie, it could have been easily disproved by both the Roman and Jewish authorities who would both have wanted to discredit the story by, for example, producing Jesus' body. In their accounts, the disciples talk about real people - such as Pilate or Caiaphas the high priest, who were close to the events - but there is no record of any ancient person accusing the disciples of making it up.

They were not lying, but were so devoted to Jesus, that a myth quickly developed about Him.

While most scholars do not believe in the lying theory, it is not uncommon (as in a lot of study of religion) for people to put forward this legendary interpretation. There are at least five reasons why the legend theory has problems:

It is hard to believe that such a speedy development of a risen-Jesus myth could arise among Jewish people who, at the time, saw their belief in one God as an antidote to many of the pagan-god legends that surrounded them from other cultures.

Legends always reflect the culture they come from - it is unlikely that, in first-century Jewish eyes, a myth about a crucified and cursed Messiah would have brought honour to Jesus.

Legends cast their heroes in a positive and larger-than-life light. Yet in the gospels the disciples often appear foolish. Jesus overturns many aspects of their culture, rather than reinforcing them. For example, in a culture in which it was assumed women were liars (they could not testify in court), the male writers of the gospels emphasise that it is women who first witness Jesus' resurrection.

The main objection to the legend theory is the short amount of time between Jesus' resurrection and the accounts of it. Normally legends take generations to develop. Yet 16 years after Jesus, Paul is already calling Him God, as if this is already known. The gospels refer to eye-witnesses who would have still been alive when they were written - for example, Jesus' brother James.

Finally numerous writers have noted how the gospels read like history, not legend, including countless examples of irrelevant detail. Mark tells us several times, "Jesus looked around him, and then said...." There are numerous historical details which have been shown as accurate by archaeological evidence. All the earliest witnesses, who staked their lives on Jesus' resurrection, emphasise that they are neither lying, nor honouring a Lord whom they know to be a myth. As John writes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete." (1 John 1: 1-4, written between 62 and 77 years after the resurrection.)



How do disciples see death?

Dallas Willard said, “I think that, when I die, it might be some time until I know it.”

In contrast to a culture which in many ways finds it hard to accept or talk about mortality, the hope of resurrection makes it possible for us to face death without fear or denial.

Disciples can embrace death without fear.

Even long before Jesus’ resurrection, the psalms say, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants.” (Psalm 116:15) For disciples, knowing Jesus has experienced our death, dying is now another way in which we can become more like Him – His dying has made death holy in that it is now something that brings us to God.

Both life and death can now be a gift. As Paul wrote, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” (Philippians 1: 21-24)

The day before he was killed at a young age, Martin Luther King preached, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will.... And so I’m happy tonight; I’m not worried about anything; I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” (3rd April 1968)

Death is now a time of gain, a time when, “...you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.” (Colossians 3:24) This is why before His own death Jesus told His disciples not to be afraid: “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (John 14:1-2)

Disciples still resist death.

Yet, while no longer the ultimate evil, death remains an enemy we are longing to see completely overcome. The “victory” and “sting” of death has been defeated (1 Corinthians 15: 55-57) through Jesus’ death and resurrection, but, like Jesus, who cried at his friend Lazarus’ tomb, we can still weep at the significant but temporary grief and pain death and dying can cause.

But the hope of resurrection means that grief might no longer be despairing (“... you do not grieve like the rest of humankind, who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13)) Instead our grieving can rightly express deep love as we miss those who are sleeping, or as we anticipate the grief of those we are leaving.





When people saw Jesus grieving for Lazarus they said, "See how he loved him." (John 11:36)

It can also be a way we utter our longing for the day when God promises to wipe every tear away. It is important in our discipleship that we can welcome death. John Wesley said, "Our people die well" and, "Every Christian should be able to preach, pray or die at a minute's notice."

But grief and frustration at the pain of death can be a faithful expression of love and longing as well. The well-intentioned funeral poem, "Death is nothing at all..." is one side of the story and is helpful only if it still allows us to bring our genuine pain to God and each other.

Death can help us live well as disciples

For disciples, seeing death through the lens of hope is a gift in living well now in anticipation of the future.

The medieval writer, Thomas a Kempis puts it like this: "Happy and wise is he who endeavours to be during his life as he wishes to be found at his death....Dear soul, from what peril and fear you could free yourself, if you lived in holy fear, mindful of your death. Apply yourself so to live now, that at the hour of death, you may be glad and unafraid.

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Learn now to die to the world, that you may begin to live with Christ...While you have time, gather the riches of everlasting life. Think only of your salvation, and care only for the things of God...Keep your heart free and lifted up to God, for here you have no abiding city. Daily direct your prayers and longings to Heaven, that at your death your soul may merit to pass joyfully into the presence of God.”

