

# Way of Discipleship Small Groups

## What is our hope beyond death?

## What proof is there for it?



### Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: Before starting this session it will be good to see whether because of personal circumstances anyone in your group might find reflecting on mortality and grief too difficult at the present moment.



### Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

How did Jesus understand His mortality?

### Understanding the information (25 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

Christians are given confident hope about life after death: “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). While of course there are many things that are beyond our imagining, Paul wants us to know and have confidence in the certainty of God’s promise.



The clearest lens we can look through to understand what happens after we die 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.” What happens to Christ, then happens to everyone.

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”. (1John 3:2) All evil, death and sin will have been completely dealt with. As a result, God will be “all in all”. (1 Corinthians 15:28) With the end of evil, there will no longer be any barrier between God and people.

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.

How might I personally experience life after death? 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' – a body in which death and sickness no longer could exist because the sting of death has been removed. 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. Jesus was still recognisable but as both earthly and heavenly He was significantly different. His wounds were still visible, but rather than being signs of pain and shame, they were evidence of His glory. 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 reflects the life, death and victory of Christ.

What happens if I die before the final resurrection? An important clue in knowing about life after death is that the Bible talks about us experiencing two stages. 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". 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'.

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.** 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)

**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)) It is important in our discipleship that we can welcome death. John Wesley said, "Our people die well."

**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."

**Discuss:** What encourages you about this hope?

## Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18 which describes the confidence we can have in resurrection, and its nature.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:

What does this passage teach me about God?

What does this passage teach me about people?

How does this passage call me to obey God?

What might I do in response to this this week?



## Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

There is no video, but you are invited to discuss your experience of having hope beyond dying.



## Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

Why can I be confident in the resurrection?

“...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. There are twelve recorded appearances of Jesus to His disciples after the resurrection. For Paul, this was of “first importance”. 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.

Arguments against this evidence have centred around three ideas:

Jesus was not really dead.

Not many people give much credibility to this argument.

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

Yet Christians were put to death for their belief in the resurrection, and 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 – 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 four 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. 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.

Legends cast their heroes in a positive and larger-than-life light. Yet in the gospels the disciples often appear foolish.

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." (1 John 1: 1-4, written between 62 and 77 years after the resurrection)

Discuss: Which of these thoughts helps you most? Why?

## Responding to God's leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, "What might God be showing me and how might I respond?" They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, "Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?"



## Group prayer (5 minutes)

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son;  
endless is the victory Thou o'er death hast won.  
Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,  
kept the folded grave-clothes where Thy body lay.  
Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son;  
endless is the victory Thou o'er death hast won.



Lo, Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb.  
Lovingly He greets us, scatters fear and gloom;  
let His church with gladness hymns of triumph sing,  
for the Lord now lives; death hath lost its sting.  
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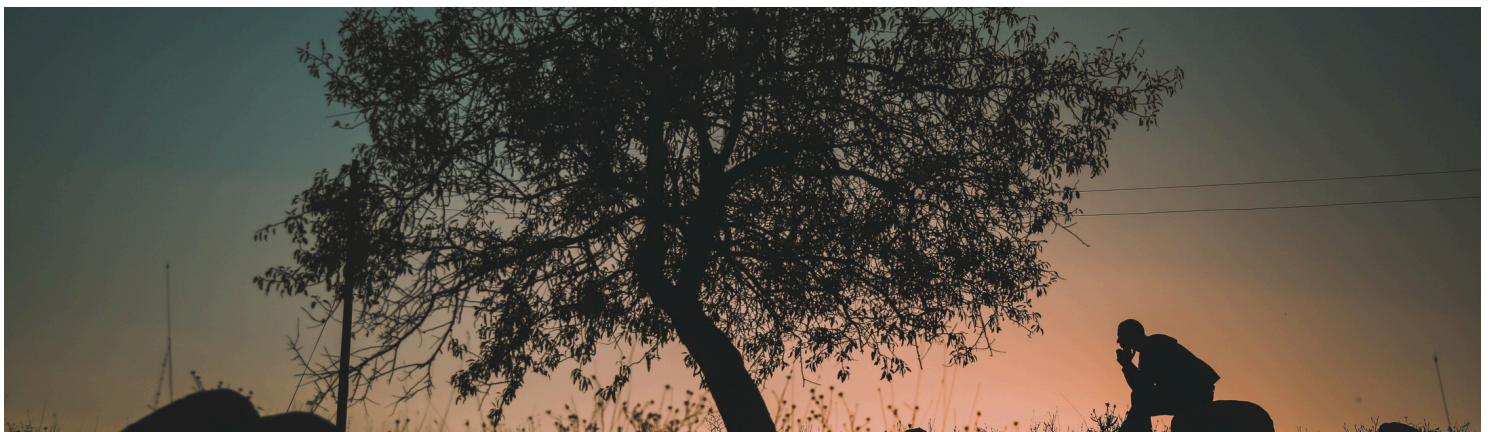
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## Additional notes:

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