

# Is death the end?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Many of you know what Twitter is, but for the benefit of those who don't, think of Twitter a little bit like Facebook, another social media platform where you can find the latest trending conversations. Donald Trump, of course, is Twitter's most famous user, with millions following his account, and you never know what he's going to say next.

But let me tell you about another Twitter account. Every single morning, it will faithfully post the exact same message every single day.

Whether you check it today, or next week, or even next year, you'll get the exact same four words. You will die someday.

You will die someday. The Twitter account's called Daily Death Reminder. Not a trendy topic, but certainly a timeless one.

But why in the world would you follow such an account? Indeed, why would you even want to be reminded about death at all? After all, isn't it a pretty distasteful and unpleasant subject to be talking about?

[ 1 : 10 ] In our Asian circles, we want to avoid any chatter about death. And so that's why, if you're Chinese, we have all these taboos about not using the number four in apartment buildings, or bringing clocks to funerals, in case by mentioning death, we invite it in.

I'm sure there are similar taboos in other cultures, like making sure you bathe straight away after a funeral, to wipe away the stench of death, and so on. So why talk about death at all?

That might be on some people's minds. So let me deal with that first. And let me just give us two reasons why we shouldn't be reluctant to talk about death. The first reason is that our reluctance to talk about death is actually out of step with history.

What do I mean by that? What I mean is that for most of human history, death was simply a reality that you came face to face with very quickly.

Right up to the 19th century, surviving into old age was actually pretty uncommon. This was in large part because many people would have died in infancy or childhood.

[ 2 : 25 ] If you were a parent, you could reasonably expect to bury at least one, if not more, of your children. You would also be less likely to have access to clean water and more likelihood of being exposed to infectious disease.

And so that means you're always aware that death could be just around the corner. And throughout most of history, you were more likely to come face to face with death because people usually died at home or in public spaces.

multiple generations live under one roof. And so your grandpa could easily have passed away in his sleep in the bed right next to you.

And indeed, if he was suffering from disease, you probably couldn't escape hearing his cries of pain. But all that has changed. I looked up the life expectancy of Malaysians in 1963 and 2019.

When the nation of Malaysia came into being, the life expectancy was 61.24 years old. Last year, it was 76.07.

[ 3 : 38 ] Now that's an increase of 15 years. That's quite a lot. Indeed, looking more globally, China now is the first country to have more than 100 million elderly people.

And this is all thanks to the remarkable medical advances that have been made in the last century, as well as the increase in the general standard of living.

All of which, of course, is wonderful. I'm not saying that it isn't. But this changed the way we see life and death. It's caused us to live most of our lives as if death is not our problem.

It's so far away. And what has also happened in the last 70 years or so is that death has become institutionalized and hidden away because the majority of people now die in hospitals or nursing

homes.

And so as a result, what has happened is that our personal encounters with death has very much been reduced. Out of sight.

[ 4 : 44 ] Out of mind. And what we can't see, we sometimes fear more. And yet that is out of step with most of history.

And what we are seeing in 2020, with the soaring death rates published daily in our newspapers from COVID-19, is actually closer to normality if we take into account all of human history.

But the second reason is even more important for us today. Our reluctance to talk about death is actually out of step with Christianity.

Now, if you're not a Christian this morning and you're listening in, welcome. And I hope that today's sermon will be an enlightening one for you. But the one thing I want you to know straight away is that when we read the Bible, death is a constant presence in the story.

Start from the beginning in the book of Genesis, by the time you get to chapter 5, which is just a few pages in, you've encountered plenty of death already, even murder.

[ 5 : 53 ] And indeed, the very symbol of Christianity itself, the cross, which is the climax of the Bible story, is a symbol of death.

And so death is integral to the story of Christianity. Hence, Christians should talk about it. In fact, the Bible actually encourages all of us to meditate on death.

Consider, for example, the prayer of Psalm 90, verse 12, which we read at the beginning of today's service. Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Think about what the psalmist is really asking. He is asking God to teach us to recognize that one day we will die.

And look at how he puts it. I hope the verse is on the screen. He believes that as we grow in awareness of our impending death, we will actually learn wisdom.

[ 7 : 04 ] We will become wise. The psalmist knows that back in verse 10, typically, we would only live into our 70s or 80s.

And if we know that, then we will learn to make the most of our days. We will seek to follow in the ways of the Lord. And so in verse 14 on the screen, he prays, satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad in all our days.

In other words, when we put both verse 12 and verse 14 together, the psalmist is actually making an astonishing request of God.

He's telling God, teach me, Lord, to live with the reality of my death so that I can live in the gladness of your love.

And so that's why, in the history of Christianity, there has been a tradition of reflecting on death, often called *memento mori*, which is Latin for remember death.

[ 8 : 20 ] Think about it. Why might Jesus often seem unimportant and irrelevant to us? The reason is because death is often far from our minds and remote from our experience.

If death is not really an issue for us, Jesus won't seem like much of a solution. You know, we go, *lya*, Jesus, *lya*, why you talk so much about eternal life when right now I'm worried about earthly issues like my shrinking savings or my life partner.

But when we remember and reflect on death, it puts all our other problems into perspective and Jesus actually becomes more alive and more precious to us.

And when Jesus becomes more alive and precious to us, well, we find ourselves satisfied in the unfailing love of God. But now I'm getting ahead of myself, so let's rewind a bit.

I hope that satisfactorily dealt with that potential preliminary question. And let's dive straight into the advertised question for this morning. Is death the end?

[ 9 : 41 ] And to answer that, we'll first of all look at the first passage that was read to us by Greg this morning. More specifically, we will home in on one verse, Hebrews 9 verse 27.

So I hope you've got your Bibles open in front of you to that verse. Now, if you ask those who have regularly sat in the Bible studies that I have led, they will tell you that whenever they ask a question, one of my most common answers is, well, yes and no.

And indeed, the question, is death the end? And that's also going to be my answer. Well, yes and no. Why?

Yes. Well, first of all, notice from this verse how our future is described. People are destined to die once.

That's our destiny. That's our end point. In this life, death is certain. We are given no choice whether we would like to meet death or not.

[10:55] We don't usually even get a say as to when we would like to meet death. When I was at school, we woke up one morning to the news that one of our schoolmates, just 13 years old, had an asthma attack in the night and passed on.

Just last week, the 20-year-old son of the popular Christian blogger, Tim Chalice, was happily playing football with his college friends when he suddenly collapsed without warning.

He never regained consciousness. Sean Connery, the very first James Bond, had a lifespan four and a half times longer than Nick Chaley's.

But he too has recently kept his appointment with death. People are destined to die regardless of whether that happens when they're young or old.

And whether you're a multi-millionaire like the late Ding Peck King, or whether you have nothing in the end, whether you are very fit and keep in shape, or your health has been slowly failing for a long time.

[12:11] The end point is the same. So yes, death is how every human life ends. It's our destiny.

And death is the end because that's how God decides your time on earth is up. Notice in Hebrews 9 verse 27 that death is not an organic process.

We might see the word destined and think blind fate. But that's not how it's meant to be read. The idea here is that God himself has scheduled your appointment with death on his calendar.

That's the connotation. And so this isn't something random. It isn't something haphazard. It's part of God's sovereign will.

Death is never accidental to God, no matter how accidental it seems to us. As Psalm 139 verse 16 on the screen puts it, all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

[13:27] And it's up to God when he calls time. He is the author. You're the character. And so he gets to decide when your story ends.

And you only die once. That's what verse 27 says. And that means the teaching of Christianity is fundamentally different from a religion like Buddhism.

Buddhism teaches that each person is caught in a potentially never-ending cycle of reincarnations. Depending on your actions in a previous life, you will return after death.

Either in the form of another more well-off living human being or in the form of an animal depending on your actions. And the goal of religion therefore is to escape this cycle.

But the Bible says differently. Once your journey in this life, in this world, in this age is done, you don't get to repeat the journey.

[14:38] You have one shot and when you die, that's it. It's like a referee blowing his whistle at the end of a football match.

That's the end. The score is final. You can't play the same match all over again. You can't sit for the test again. You don't get to alter your choices.

So let me summarize. Is death the end? Yes. In the sense that it's the end point of your present life. It's the point where God decides your little story in his bigger story is done. It's also the end of any opportunities to revise your choices.

But the answer is also no. death is not the end. For as verse 27 goes on to show, there is something after death.

[15:43] People are destined to die once and after that to face judgment. Death isn't the end because although your journey is done, that doesn't mean you completely cease to exist.

death. You see, if we think of ourselves as purely material beings, then death would indeed mean that we just dissolve into nothingness. The moment your heart stops pumping and the brain stops functioning and the vital organs shut down.

That's it. That's what materialists believe. death. But the biblical understanding of death goes beyond just the fact that our bodies stop working.

You see, the Bible thinks of us as embodied and flesh souls. And in the Bible's understanding, physical death is the temporary separation of a person's material element and immaterial element.

To put it more simply, your body and spirit are a unity. But death interrupts that unity momentarily.

[17:06] And next week, we'll look a little more closely at what happens in that period while our body and spirit remain separated. So do wait till next week if you got more questions about that.

death. But for anyone taking notes, if you want a quick verse that implies death brings about this separation of body and spirit, well, look up James 2 verse 26 on your own later.

But this basically means that you don't stop existing at the moment of physical death. Death is not followed by nothingness.

rather in due course, it is followed by the day of judgment. You will find many other parts of scripture teaching the coming of this day.

Let's just have a look at some of them. Here is Acts 17 verse 31. For he, that's God, has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed, that's Jesus.

[18:16] Or listen to Jesus himself speaking in Matthew 12 verse 36. But I tell you that everyone will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.

And so death is not the end. There is still the day of judgment to come. death. Indeed, in Hebrews 9 verse 27, to go back to that verse, death and judgment are joined together by the word destined.

They go together. And just before we take a closer look at this day of judgment, let me just say that the day of judgment is good news.

You know, anytime we talk about the day of judgment, judgment, we might get a picture in our minds of all those street preachers shouting angrily and calling curses on everyone within their immediate radius.

It feels so crude, so offensive. But the day of judgment is actually a good thing because it means that God is going to finish the story of this present age with a happy ending.

[19:38] God is going to serve justice. Imagine if you were someone who lived in a country where your family was brutally raped and murdered and the perpetrators not only got away with it, but they actually lived very luxurious lives because they were powerful people and they were never held accountable for their crimes.

And sadly, we know that such stories do happen. Well, the fact that there's a day of judgment means that they will one day be held accountable.

They won't get away with it. And that brings us relief because that also means that our universe at its heart is not a random and immoral place.

No, it's fundamentally a moral universe. It means that although things might be upside down for a while, one day it will be turned the right side up.

But let's take a closer look now and ask, what happens on Judgment Day? And the good news is we don't have to speculate.

[21:08] We don't have to rely on those stories that pop up now and again in the Christian bookstores about someone who supposedly died and went to heaven or hell and came back with a report.

And usually if you compare these books, they contradict one another. No, we have the infallible word of God. And so a good place to go to find out is actually our second Bible passage from this morning in Revelation 20 verse 11 to 15.

Where notice in this little passage, John gives us his eyewitness account. He begins verse 11 by saying, then I saw.

God gives John, the writer of the book of Revelation, a vision, a glimpse of the future, so that we can prepare for it.

And so let's have a look together with John at Revelation 20. Firstly, let's look at the timing. Hebrews 9 verse 27 earlier compresses the timeline.

[22:19] People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, the writer says. But here in Revelation 20, we get a slightly expanded timeline. Notice in verse 13 that we are told that the sea and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them.

Now, that's the language of bodily resurrection. Verse 13 is basically saying that John saw the dead physically resurrected. And so that gives us the sequence.

The sequence here seems to be this. Physical death first, resulting in temporary separation of body and spirit, followed by what we'll call the intermediate state, which we'll find out about next week, and then followed by bodily resurrection at the end of time, which we'll also look more at in two weeks' time.

And then final judgment. In verse 11, we are told that the earth and the heavens fled from his presence, referring to our universe as we presently know it, getting ready to receive a total overhaul in preparation for the new heavens and the new earth.

You know, you will find a similar picture in 2 Peter 3 verse 10 to 12, which paints a picture of all of creation being dissolved and then renewed as we look forward to a brand new creation.

[ 23 : 59 ] Judgment Day will take place when Jesus returns and this present age comes to an end. Next, let's look at the people.

Who is involved on this day of judgment? In verse 11, we come face to face with a great white throne. The fact that it's great speaks of the splendor and majesty and authority of the one seated on it.

And the whiteness likely reflects the holiness and glory of its occupant. But who is it that's seated on the throne? back in Revelation 4 and 5, it is clearly God himself, the creator of the universe, who is seated there.

And the picture also matches Daniel 7 verse 9 to 10, where the ancient of days, and that's God, takes his seat upon the throne to execute judgment on all the kingdoms of the world.

However, in many other parts of scripture, it is also affirmed that Christ will act as judge.

[ 25 : 16 ] We already saw that earlier in Acts 17 verse 31, which appeared on the screen a little earlier. But here are a few more references on the screen. 2 Timothy 4 verse 1, in this verse we find that little phrase, in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead.

Or come to the next slide, John 5 verse 27, and God has given him authority to judge because he is the son of man.

So who is it that judges? God or Christ? I feel like it is unnecessary to choose. God is the one who has appointed Christ as the judge.

And they both act with such an unbreakable and unsurpassable unity that we can say it is God who judges or Christ who judges and it amounts to saying the same thing.

Perhaps more importantly is to take note of who the audience is before this great white throne. In verse 12, we're told that John saw the dead.

[ 26 : 38 ] In other words, he's seeing before his very eyes every person who has ever lived.

Remember, that's the destiny of every single person, like in Hebrews 9 verse 27. And so John sees all of humanity, trillions and trillions of them, great and small, rich and poor, the famous and the not so famous, the talented and the not so talented, all of them, they're packed into this courtroom, ready to be judged.

And remember the timing this takes place when Jesus returns, which means you can spot yourself in the crowd. You will be there even if and even when you die.

You will be physically raised from the dead to attend this gathering, of which none will be excluded. As Paul teaches in Acts 24 verse 15 on the screen, there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

Some have wondered if only unbelievers are summoned to Judgment Day, but the testimony of Scripture suggests otherwise. And so elsewhere, in Romans 14 verse 10, Paul, speaking to Christians, says this, we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

2 Corinthians 5 verse 10, which is the main passage we'll look at next week, says this, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

[ 28 : 32 ] But what is going to happen on this day? Well, we will have the opening of the books. Notice there are two sets of books.

The first set is the one mentioned at the end of verse 12. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

And we can call this the book of deeds. Imagine a device. Imagine that this device can record every single action, every single motion, of every single second, of every single day that you have ever lived on this earth.

It notes down all your conversations. It can even capture your thoughts. It is a perfect record of your entire life.

And it is reproduced here in such a book which the judge can browse through. In our human court rooms, evidence is often imperfect.

[ 29 : 48 ] relying on eyewitness testimony that is not always reliable, on fragmentary data, and so on. But not in this divine courtroom.

We will be tried according to perfect evidence. how long do you think before our guilt is established?

How many pages would the judge need to read aloud before we break down and we say, okay, no, no, don't need to go through all the rest. I know who I am. I plead guilty.

Of course, I imagine in this set of books, we would indeed find acts of kindness and generosity. And yet, there would be plenty of things that we would rather never be seen in the public gallery.

And yet, Hebrews 4, verse 13 tells us, nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

[ 31 : 04 ] You know, just this week, I read about a journalist, a long-time journalist employed at the New Yorker, which is a magazine in America.

And what happened was that he was on a Zoom call, Zoom meeting. But then, halfway through that Zoom meeting, he switched to another screen and he decided to engage in phone sex.

And he exposed himself while doing that. And he thought he was already closed his screen and so on. But unfortunately for him, everyone could see what he was doing and the shameful act that he was involved in.

None of us would want that, would we? But on that day of judgment, God isn't on a witch hunt, looking to find imagined for, he would just open the book of our lives and he would just take note of what he finds there.

He would just see what our actions were. We will be judged not by our church affiliation, not by our cultivated reputation.

[ 32 : 14 ] It will be a judgment according to works. And when we hear that, we might very well cry out with the psalmist in Psalm 130.

If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? Well, that's right, isn't it? Because like it or not, our book of deeds will read more like a record of sin.

But that is not the only book on display here. In verse 12, we're told that another book is open, the book of life. One chapter later in Revelation 21 verse 27, it is called the Lamb's Book of Life.

That's who this book belongs to. And this book doesn't record deeds. It records names. And this is a list of people whose sins have been paid for.

It is a list of those whose robes have been cleansed and made white in the blood of the Lamb, as one image in the book of Revelation earlier puts it. My friends, it is a list of those who today have truly trusted in Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

[ 33 : 40 ] Now, are the deeds of those whose names are found in the book of life also recorded in the book of deeds? Now, it's not clear from this passage. It doesn't really tell us one way or the other, but I think so.

The Bible seems to say that even Christians still have to give an account of their lives. Romans 14 verse 12 suggests as much. So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

And actually, there will be nobody in the book of life who do not also have a record of deeds that come about precisely because of their faith in Christ.

Good deeds will not get you into the book of life, and yet, those in the book of life will also have deeds.

We see this even within the book of Revelation itself. You see, those who have their robes washed by the blood of the Lamb are also those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

[ 34 : 53 ] They are those who do not worship the beast. That's what we see in Revelation 14. they have deeds as well. But it is the book of life that matters most.

For if you are not in it, you cannot be pardoned. And the sentence is severe. In verse 15, we're told what that sentence is. It is the lake of fire, mentioned three times in verses 14 and 15 alone.

death. It is also referred to as the second death. We've mentioned physical death already as a kind of death described in the Bible. And the second death is the culmination, the end point of what we can call spiritual death in the Bible.

Spiritual death refers to our separation between us and God as when Paul says we are dead in our sins in Ephesians 2 verse 1.

And the second death is when that separation between us and God becomes permanent. This second death is truly the end.

[ 36 : 07 ] It's spelled the end for the devil. In Revelation 20 verse 10, a verse before our passage, we're told that this lake of fire is also where the devil is thrown into.

And so actually as an older pastor so helpfully reminded me in a talk that he gave, hell is not a place the devil runs. Hell is the place of punishment for him as well.

And if we're not in the book of life, we will join him there. It's unpleasant to think about and perhaps we think that we shouldn't mention it at all.

Jesus himself brings up the subject again and again. I've put some references on your handout where he does that. One theologian observes that future punishment is mentioned in some way by every single New Testament author.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, and Jude all mention it in their writings.

[ 37 : 17 ] For the second death is truly the end and so we must mention it. We must warn others about it. And the big question we must immediately ask is, is your name written in the book of life?

Remember, the book of life is not the same as the official church membership directory. You might very well officially be a member of a church and yet not be in this book of life.

You could be on many serving rosters in church or on the board of some NGOs which are doing some of the very best work in our community or on the list of top donors to many excellent charities and still not be in this book of life.

The question of whether you're in this book of life or not is the question of what your relationship to Jesus is. What is the state of that particular relationship?

Are you relying on him alone to bring you to God? If not, don't wait a minute longer. Do that today.

Only he alone can put your name in this book.

[ 38 : 30 ] And if you are trusting in Jesus today, then what you need to know is that you already have the assurance. come back with me to Hebrews 9 verse 28.

So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

In other words, death is not the end, for Jesus will bring an end to death for those who trust in him.

Another theologian, Michael Bird, in his systematic theology, has a subsection which is titled, Judgment as Facing God Without the Cross.

Well, that would be horrible, wouldn't it? Because to face God without the cross would mean facing God with my sin. But if we face God on that day with the cross, we will have no fear.

The book of Job describes death as the king of terrors, but it will no longer be a king of terrors to us, not with Jesus, because he has already written our very names with his blood in the book of life.

[ 39 : 54 ] As Jesus says in John 5, verse 24, very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and will not be judged, but has crossed over from death to life.

With Jesus, when we face the judge, we are actually facing our saviour. And so there is no fear.

He has rescued us today already. Death is no longer the end. Life with Jesus becomes the end.

God is no God but how does knowing all this impact us today? If we know that judgment day is the end, well, how does that knowledge today transform our lives?

God does I'll just point out one big way it does so. And it does so by causing us to live for the praise of God alone.

[ 41 : 01 ] It causes us to live in such a way that in the end, only his assessment matters. And that's what Paul is getting at in 1 Corinthians 4 verse 3 to 5.

This is our last slide for this morning. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court.

Indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.

It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart.

At that time, each will receive their praise from God. Now, in this passage, Paul isn't saying that he doesn't care at all what other people think or that he's unwilling to receive feedback.

Rather, in context, he is saying that his ministry is ultimately accountable to God above all else.

Even his self-assessment cannot preempt the judgment of Jesus Christ.

[ 42 : 10 ] For God himself will bring to light everything that needs to be brought to light. God alone can give the perfect performance review.

And so, Paul simply aims to live for the praise of God. He longs to hear God's affirmations on the day of judgment. And so can we.

The temporal judgments or evaluations that we might receive from others or even ourselves now is no longer the most crucial thing.

Living rightly before the one seated on the throne is now our prime motivation. And, even if no one else were to notice our attempts to live a Christ-centered godly life, well, rest assured, God does. In the end, only his judgment matters. So live for his praise. Sharpen your focus. Live more intentionally.

[ 43 : 23 ] And when you do, you will have few regrets when your appointment with death comes. Remember, we don't know when that day is. And so make the most of the day. Fight against sin.

Ask God to set your heart afire, to blaze with his love. Trust Jesus. Do good to your neighbor. Forgive others as the Lord has forgiven you.

Warn them about the second death. Number your days so that you might gain a heart of wisdom. And then, rest easy when you stand before the great white throne.

For you will sing, salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. Let us pray. People are destined to die once and after that to face judgment. And Father, you have told us that that is inevitable. That is a day that we all cannot escape.

[ 44 : 42 ] And Father, we come to you on the one hand with fear and trembling, knowing that you are a consuming fire, knowing that you can give the perfect performance review, and that when you review our actions, you know that we don't even live up to our own standards, never mind your standards.

But Father, thank you that before the throne of God above, we have a strong and perfect plea. We have the great high priest whose name is love, who ever pleads, and who has shed his blood for me.

And so Father, please help us to come to Jesus again, to trust in him, to go to him that he might write our names in the book of life.

And we know that as those whose names are written in the book of life, we are those who should live for your praise. And so please help us to live for your praise alone, this day and every single day.

Help us to number our days, and indeed live gladly and be satisfied in your love. thank you that death is not the end because of Jesus Christ.

[ 45 : 57 ] All this we pray in the name of your son. Amen. Amen.