

During the second world war, C.S Lewis preached a sermon which is really a talk and not a sermon, but he said something that is insightful which is what C.S Lewis is known for – that is saying or writing insightful things from a Christian perspective. The title of this piece is “Learning in Wartime” and what he discussed was the strangeness of studying in a university while so much killing and dying was going on in the second world war. He gives his perspective on why it was important to continue the studying things like literature and history which had nothing directly to do with the war effort. But along the way he makes a point that is an important biblical point and relevant for us in the light of the fact that so many people are dying in the current pandemic.

Here is a little of what he says, “What does war do to death? It certainly does not make it more frequent: 100 percent of us die, and the percentage cannot be increased.... Yet war does do something to death. It forces us to remember it.... War makes death real to us: and that would have been regarded as one of its blessings by most of the great Christians of the past. They thought it good for us to be always aware of our mortality. I am inclined to think they were right.” (p. 53)

At another place he says, “I think it important to try to see the present calamity in a true perspective. The war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice” (p. 44).

Lewis was is not minimizing the terrible calamity of millions of lives cut short in war. Each life lost early because of the war was a terrible loss. He makes it clear that that should not be minimized. The point he is making is that in times of peace it is easy to forget that we are all heading towards the day of our death and war has a way of making what is always real more real in our minds. And we can say the same thing about the current pandemic.

The pandemic is such a big deal because many people are dying because of it. The social distancing and the virtual shutdown of the economy are attempts to save lives – to minimize the loss of life. Every day we are told to do everything we can to stop the spread of the virus, especially by staying home because doing so will help save lives. The reason the whole world is turned up-side-down because of this pandemic is because the virus is killing large numbers of people. But C.S. Lewis’ point about the second world war is just as relevant for us in the pandemic. The pandemic does not make death more frequent because the ultimate death rate is always 100 percent. Without diminishing the tragedy of so many lives being lost earlier than they would otherwise be because of the pandemic, the far more significant and serious reality is that every single one of us will one day die.

One of the great burdens of the Bible is to urge us to live our lives in the light of the certainty of the fact that we will all die and that after death we will go either to heaven or to hell. Hebrews 9:27 says, “[I]t is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” Death and final judgment put all of life into perspective. That is just as true and just as important and just as urgent in good times as it is in a time of pandemic. The pandemic impresses death on our minds more forcefully because so many people are dying and our risk of

dying sooner rather than later is increased. Some of us are in the category of those who are more vulnerable to this virus. But as we hear repeatedly on the news that people in most age groups are dying. It is possible for anyone of us to be taken by this virus.

But most us will not die in this pandemic. Young people are relatively save from dying. People under 70 are relatively safe from dying in this pandemic. But the much more serious reality is the fact that we are all going to die. The 20 or 30 or 50 years of life that we may yet live on this earth are not insignificant, but the Bible does insist that even a long life is fleeting. Psalm 103:15-16 says, "As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it and it is gone, and its place know it no more."

Death on a large scale like we see in this pandemic should remind us of death on a much larger scale which takes place every generation. The reality is that every person alive today will one day die unless the Lord returns first. And without minimizing the sadness of the huge loss of life in the pandemic, the certainty that we will all die at some point is of far greater significance. And the message of the Bible is about what Jesus has done to rescue us from the fear of death so that we can face it in hope knowing that he has given us eternal life.

Today is Easter. We celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The background to Easter is death. The problem that the resurrection solves is the problem of death. That is why appreciating the meaning of the resurrection is rooted in feeling the weight of how serious death is.

Death is so very sad. We want to live. And we want our loved ones to live. Life is precious. Our relationships are precious. Losing a loved one is the hardest thing we can experience. And for ourselves, we want to live as long as possible. The disaster of death is why the pandemic is such a big deal. And it is why the whole area of medicine is such a big deal in our world. Just think of how much money and how much effort goes into extending our lives and nurturing our health. This is all a fight against death. As human beings we do almost anything to extend our lives and that of our loved ones. And death is the great enemy of that. No matter what we do as human beings – no matter how much money we spend and how much collective brain-power we put towards healing sickness and extending life – every single person eventually dies.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead and the Bible speaks of that as a victory over death. The great news of the Bible is that Jesus Christ has won the victory over death. That is far better news than even the news of a vaccine for the covid 19 virus would be. That would be wonderful news and hopefully we will hear that news sooner rather than later. But even if a perfectly effective vaccine would be available in massive quantities tomorrow, every life saved now would still eventually be lost. But what God has accomplished through Christ is the defeat of death itself. In John 11:26, Jesus said, "Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." The most well known verse in the Bible is John 3:16 which says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Eternal life. The longing for eternal life is a theme in the literature of the ages. It has been a dream of the human race to somehow live forever. The goal of medicine has been to extend human life as much as possible, and it has been remarkably successful due to the ability that God has given humans to find solutions to problems. The dream of eternal life is still alive in the minds of certain dreamers who believe that there will come a time when humans will conquer death.

The good news of Easter is that that has already been done and that that is the true meaning and goal of history. The biblical account of history leads to eternal life. The goal of God's purposes is eternal life with God in a renewed creation. And at the center of that glorious and certain hope is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Now significantly, the resurrection hope of the Bible is not that we will not die physically. The resurrection hope of the Bible is very different from the desire of human beings for this present life to continue indefinitely. The biblical hope of the resurrection is much different and also much better. It is much different because it involves going through physical death and our souls living on in the presence of God until the return of Christ when the souls and bodies of God's people will be reunited in the general resurrection. And it is much better because it is rooted in Jesus' victory over sin so that eternal life is a much greater and fuller life than the life of this present age.

Paul makes this point in 1 Corinthians 15:19 where he says, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." His point in this section is that if Christ had not risen from the dead, there is no hope for humanity. In 1 Corinthians 15:17 he says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins." An essential part of the resurrection hope is not the current life continuing, but a different way of living that begins now and will continue forever. And that different way of living is a life in which the curse and power of sin has been broken.

Those who believe in Jesus are no longer in their sins. The way Jesus won the victory over death is by winning the victory over sin. There is an inseparable connection between sin and death in the Bible and that is why death will always be a reality in a sinful world. The resurrection of Jesus from dead is the result of what Jesus accomplished by his perfect life and his death on the cross. Jesus won the victory over sin first by living a sinless life and second, by paying the penalty for sin by his death. Once that had been done, the resurrection had to happen because the penalty of sin had been paid. Death is the penalty for sin. When the penalty is paid the prisoner goes free. Just as sin leads to death so the victory over sin results in the victory over death.

It is that connection that Paul is emphasizing in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "And if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." The implication of this is that since Christ has been raised your faith is effective and you are no longer in your sins. The resurrection of Christ means that believers are no longer in their sins. And since they are no longer in their sins, the justice of God requires that they are also set free from death. That is why believers receive eternal life already in this life. Eternal life is the life that results

from Jesus paying the penalty for sin. Because he paid the penalty for sin, he rose from the dead, and since he stood in the place of his people, they share in his resurrection life which is eternal life.

Now there are benefits to that in this life already. If we believe in Jesus we share in his resurrection life in the here and now. We have eternal life in the here and now. That means forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, freedom from the power of sin so that we are growing in living life to the glory of God. These are this-worldly benefits of the resurrection of Christ.

But 1 Corinthians 15 focuses on the benefits of the resurrection of Christ beyond this life. There are many benefits of salvation in this life, but the biblical perspective is always ... the best is yet to come. We are always pointed to the future where we will experience the fullness of our salvation which is the fullness of life.

Just think of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:19 "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." That is a very interesting statement. What it does is powerfully direct our hope to what lies beyond this earthly life. We are so supremely blessed as believers because we have hope beyond this life and that hope is rooted in the resurrection of Christ which guarantees our future resurrection.

Paul continues to point us forward beyond this earthly life when he refers to the resurrection of Christ as the first fruits of the full harvest of resurrections. In verse 20 he says, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." And in verse 23 he says, "But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." He is pointing us toward the resurrection of the bodies of believers at the end of the age when Jesus returns. He is using the imagery of first fruits. The first fruits were the first part of the harvest that were offered to God. But they were the first part of the full harvest that was to come. The point is that there is one harvest and the first fruits are the harbinger of the full harvest to come.

In this case the resurrection of Jesus is the first fruits and the full harvest to come is the resurrection of the people of God at the end of the age. Paul is pointing us ahead to the fulfillment of the Christian hope. This hope is for the resurrection of our bodies. It is for an embodied life in God's love and favor on a renewed physical creation.

There is more in this chapter that points us towards the future. Verses 24-26, "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Paul points our hope towards the end when the victory Jesus has accomplished will be brought to its culmination. Jesus' victory means that there are losers. And here the losers – the vanquished – the conquered - are the enemies of God – rules, authority and powers which are opposed to God. The enemies are unrepentant sinners and the death that is the result of sin. What Jesus has overcome is all opposition to God and all of its consequences. And the end that believers are hoping towards is a world where God's reign is uncontested

because sin and death have been conquered – the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God comes fully when every rule and authority and power is destroyed. That is when all of God’s enemies are destroyed – when God’s kingdom is the only kingdom, and everything is in subjection to God.

Verse 28, “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.”

This is what Jesus began to achieve by his death and resurrection and which he will bring to its culmination when he returns at the same time as he will resurrect his people from the grave. The future we look forward to is a life forever in resurrected bodies in a kingdom where God’s rule is no longer contested – where God is all in all – where sin and death are no more – the kingdom of God in its fullness. It will be glorious because everyone there will be loving and serving God and enjoying God. It will be glorious because there will be no more sin and no more death. It will be glorious because we will be there, if we are believers, not as disembodied souls, but as fully glorified human beings – souls and bodies reunited and glorified – resurrected bodies – in a renewed creation.

That is our hope. The heart of it is being with God – joyfully serving the king and flourishing through serving the king. We will have our bodies back – renewed and glorified. God will be the focus and we will know the blessing of sinlessness – loving God and our neighbor perfectly. All the negativity gone forever – because sin and death have been overcome. This is the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus. Life forevermore in Jesus and focused on loving and pleasing the Father.

This passage gives us an inkling of what that will be like. It does that by giving us some hints about what our resurrected bodies will be like. Verses 42-44, “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; 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.” There is both sameness and difference. In each case it is the same body that Paul is speaking about. It is not a completely different body. The same body that goes into the grave will come out of the grave. It will not be a completely different body. And yet it will be renewed in wonderful ways – ways suited for the new environment of the renewed creation.

Our bodies will no longer be perishable. Our bodies are perishable now. We are subject to sickness. As we age our bodies break down. And we all eventually die. That will no longer be the case when we are raised from the dead. Our bodies will be imperishable. They will never break down. They will never get sick. We will never grow old. These are bodies that are designed for eternal life. Imperishable.

And they will be glorious. Our bodies are sown in dishonor. Dead bodies must be disposed of. That’s what graves are for. They hide the dead body from our sight. There is something dishonorable about a dead body. It is hidden from sight. But those same bodies of the saints will come out of those graves glorious. We don’t know exactly what that means. But it is the opposite of the dishonor in which dead bodies are buried. Glorious

is beautiful – God is really good at beauty. Think of some of the things we call glorious in the creation. There are all kinds of things that are so breathtakingly beautiful that we say they are glorious. Whatever precisely our glorified bodies will look like, they will be awesomely beautiful – healthy – bursting with life. And there will be no vanity – no haughtiness – each one will give glory to God and count others more glorious than themselves.

And they will be powerful. “It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.” Our current bodies have power and that is part of the wonder of being human. We can do things. But we are so aware of weakness – and that weakness increases as we get older until all the power is gone. Our bodies go into the grave in utter weakness. But they will come out of the grave powerful in ways that we can’t even imagine. We will have powerful bodies because God will have stuff for us to do. God is not going to give us powerful bodies for no reason. We will have power to do things in the service of God. And because there will be no more curse – we will exercise that power without frustration. God is going to give us strong powerful bodies with which to serve him.

And finally spiritual. “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.” The distinction here is emphatically not between physical and non-physical. The resurrection body will be a body – a physical body – otherwise it would not be resurrected. The distinction between natural and spiritual here is not between physical and non-physical but between a body which is focused on this earthly life and one that is designed for the new creation. As one commentator puts it, “In this passage, the distinction as to do with the difference between ordinary human life and life empowered by God’s Spirit.” Spiritual almost always has to do with the Holy Spirit in the NT and so a spiritual body here is one that is perfectly walking in step with the Spirit.

This passage as a whole points us to the future. The resurrection of Christ has blessings now already, but the fullness of those blessings awaits the final resurrection. We are brought from spiritual death to spiritual life in the here and now, but one of the things that spiritual life gives us is hope for what is to come – the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

In this earthly life we live in the shadow of death. Death is the great enemy. But the resurrection of Christ means that God has defeated death through the saving work of Christ and so for those who believe in Christ there is a certain hope of a glorious future. Death is not the end. It is in fact a new beginning – first as our souls go immediately to be with Christ, but at the second coming, when we are raised from the dead, we will receive our imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual bodies. Then we will know fullness of life that is far beyond the greatest blessedness we have known in this life.

The Bible certainly emphasizes the significance of this earthly life. But at the same time there is a huge emphasis on the fact that the best is yet to come and that the renewed person has a longing for the glory that awaits us. The resurrection of Jesus certainly has its implications for the here and now, but it also points us to the resurrection of our bodies and so to the future when we will enjoy the culmination of our salvation.

And that is a huge comfort in the face of death – whether that is the death we will all die or the way that we are faced with death in this pandemic. Whether times are pleasant or whether they are hard – the Lord points us to the future beyond this life. Death is still a reality in our world, but the sting of death as been removed by the victory over sin and death Jesus has won and which the resurrection demonstrates.

And so Paul sums up the joyous hope of the resurrection. Verses 53-57, “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

This is the hope that we celebrate at Easter. Jesus’ victory over sin and death. And because of that victory we can look beyond the pain and the troubles of this life to the glorious life that awaits us in a world where sin and death will be no more.