

Better Off Dead?

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[0 : 00] After 25 years of living in a wheelchair, my paralysed body is beginning to break down. I shouldn't complain. I have suffered through the usual lung and kidney infections that accompany quadriplegia.

I've enjoyed miraculously good health for years. All that changed in 1991. For me, it was a year of blood pressure problems, drastic weight loss, infections and worst of all, pressure sores on my side and back.

For three long weeks, two stubborn sores forced me to bed. And who could guess how long it would take to close those oozing wounds?

Now, I start with this quote from somebody you might know, a quadriplegic woman, Joni Erickson-Tarda. Because I think that while we're able-bodied, it's hard for us to imagine what it would be like not to have the use of our legs, to be confined to our beds or one of those big wheelchairs.

You know, not to be able to run or kick a ball, not to be able to work or to take ourselves on our own to the toilet, not be able to stroll outside and feel the sun on our faces, to be dependent on others, sidelined from life.

[1 : 20] For 38 years, we hear, the man in John 5 has been an invalid. And now he was confined to his mattress amongst the other invalids in the colonnades surrounding the Bethesda pool, waiting.

Waiting for the cure promised to the first person who entered the pool after the waters were troubled. And then with a command, get up, take up your bed and walk.

Jesus brought that helplessness, that boredom, that despairing waiting. But what is more remarkable, now that of itself is remarkable.

But what is more remarkable, even shocking, are the words that Jesus speaks to him when he finds him again. Verse 14. Afterwards, Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, See, you are well. Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. Now that's shocking. Firstly, because how could anything be worse than having no use of your legs, being paralysed for 38 years, lying there day in, day out, the discomfort, the pity, the helplessness, seeing life pass him by.

[2 : 46] Think, what might he have missed in those 38 years? All that rich experience, the joys of growing relationships, marriage, children, the small triumphs of personal achievement, none of that had been his.

His lot had been day stretching into another day of the same. The same walls to stare at, the same useless legs to drag about, the same hopelessness, knowing he had no one to take him into the pool, a painful monotony.

38 years. Now some might have said he was better off dead. Some say that today. Janie tells us that a relative of hers, that quadriplegic woman I quoted earlier, said when her initial injury stabilised, such a shame, so unfortunate, she'd be better off if she'd never made it.

Now we might not say it, but I suspect that's what many of us think. Death is preferable. How could anything be worse than what this man had already experienced?

But Jesus says there is something worse. And in this passage, he lets us know what it is. Verse 28. Do not marvel at this.

[4 : 10] An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out. Those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

This something worse, you see, is not something death spares you from. It is something death brings you to. The resurrection to judgment, to condemnation, where God pronounces a verdict on your life and then executes his sentence.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, say Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of the content of that resurrection to condemnation as everlasting punishment. In other places, the outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, the unquenchable fire.

There is something worse than suffering in this life, says Jesus. Resurrection to judgment. Now that's shocking to many of us because we live in an age where many want to believe that on the one hand, you die and then you rot.

That's the finish of it. Lots of people want to believe that. And others want to believe that no matter how you've lived, you will be in a better place. I don't know if you go to the funerals of non-Christians.

[5 : 31] I've been to a few. And they talk about the person being up there in the stars, looking down. They just want to believe it. But Jesus, with these words to the healed man, doesn't just shock us by saying there's something worse.

He shocks us in another way. See, it's quite plain that he thinks that sin, disobedience to God, missing the mark in our behaviour, causes and deserves this something worse.

Sin no more that nothing worse may happen to you. Now, how could sin be that serious? For the consensus view today is that sin, if we still use that old-fashioned language, is pretty trivial.

That's the sense you get, isn't it? It's not something to feel bad or worried about. Perhaps I told a lie to my parents. So what? It got me out of trouble and prevented a fuss. And they didn't need to know and it was no big deal.

Oh, perhaps I fudged a little on my income tax. That doesn't mean I'm not a good person. The government's greedy. In any way, I worked hard for that money and I'll use it better than they will. Oh, maybe I do run people down in conversation or abuse them to their face, but it's only words and if they're not tough enough to take it, that's their problem.

[6 : 55] Perhaps I've used other people's gear without telling them that they weren't using it. So what if I have sex with someone I'm not married to? We're adults. We both wanted it. It felt so good. Lying, stealing, slander, gossip, unkindness, rudeness, sexual indulgence, not such a big deal.

We tell ourselves. Everyone does it. But wait a minute. Before we dismiss sin as no big deal and that's what our world wants you to do, let's think about what sin does.

Those hurtful words. They crush a spirit, fill a day with misery, breed resentment and hatred. They poison a community. Those lies create distrust and habitual dishonesty destroys families and marriages, corrupts businesses, ruins economies.

That sexual immorality leaves scars, making achieving the intimacy that cures our loneliness harder, devalues commitment, fuels deceit.

Theft brings poverty and insecurity and violence brings grief and a great burden of fear and anger. Sin, not living God's way, is no trivial matter, even measured by its impact on others.

[8 : 12] But sin is more. For all sin involves treating God with contempt. So it's God who said, don't lie, don't steal, honour your father and mother, don't commit adultery.

And when you do those things, you're saying, I know better than that. God, what does he know? And our sin, remember, isn't behind God's back.

We do it in his face for he sees and knows all. Now what does that kind of contempt for our good creator deserve?

He gives us life. He gives us every good thing. He is wise and just, holy and good. How can we ever measure the seriousness of standing in God's face and saying, you know nothing, you don't deserve to be listened to, I'll do what I want with the life and good gifts you give and sustain, you get out of my way.

And that's what we say to God every time we sin. In Jesus' eyes, sin is serious. and those who sin deserve to rise to condemnation and eternal punishment.

[9 : 27] Now, because some of you may be feeling a little uncomfortable hearing this, perhaps not uncomfortable, even irritated and angry with this talk of sin and resurrection to judgment and eternal punishment because it's not fashionable language.

In fact, you might see this kind of talk as just trying to manipulate people through fear, just trying to scare, not warn. Why is that?

Well, it's because many in our society believe religion is just about morality and the church is just trying to act as a moral policeman and maintain its influence in society by using this talk of judgment to enforce its understanding of right and wrong.

Now, with this understanding, talk of judgment and punishment is just a form of moral bullying and offensive coming from people whose moral authority, Christians, has been discredited by child abuse scandals.

Now, that's very true in Australia. Is it true here? I think abuse is pretty widespread, isn't it? But if you're tempted to think like that, to be irritated by this talk of sin and judgment, to just see it as a form of manipulation, there are two problems with that position.

[10:47] Firstly, Christianity is not primarily about morality or social influence. Christians, gospel Christians, are not in the business of enforcing external morality on others.

No, being a Christian is about a relationship with the living God. Oh, and secondly, it begs the truth of the question, the question of the reality of heaven and hell.

You see, that response to Jesus' language assumes without proving that there is no heaven or hell. Now, perhaps like John Lennon, you'd like to imagine things that way.

But imagination and reality are two different things, aren't they? So I might imagine myself kicking a goal in the World Cup, but I don't think that will influence the Australian selectors, desperate as they may be.

And for the cyclists amongst you, I might imagine myself winning the Alpe d'Huez stage of the Tour de France, but that doesn't mean the recruiters from UAE Emirates or Jumbo Visma will ever knock at my door.

[11:58] Imagination and reality are two quite different things. If there is a resurrection and judgment, then not wanting to think there is doesn't change reality. And if there is a resurrection and judgment, that means when I talk about it, I'm not trying, or any other preacher does, I'm not trying to manipulate you by telling you about it.

Rather, I am warning you so that you can do something about it. You may not have realised that this is where your sin, your disobedience of God, your ignoring of God is leading.

Jesus plainly taught that there is such a resurrection and judgment. These are his words and in these matters his words are true and reliable.

But are they? That's the issue, isn't it? Why should we listen to Jesus? See, if Jesus is just a man, just a creature of his own time, sharing all the beliefs and superstitions of his time, then there's no particular reason for us to listen to Jesus.

But that is not Jesus' estimate of himself. When he's questioned about healing this man on the Sabbath, he says, oh, my father is working until now and I am working.

[13:24] His defence is that what is good for God is good for him. And the reason is his relationship with God whom he calls his own father.

In fact, verse 19, he says, truly, truly, I say to you, the son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the father doing. For whatever the father does, that the son does likewise.

He says, he is dependent on the father. He does whatever the father does. That is, that his works are the works of God, that listening to him, you're actually listening to God, one who is equal to God.

And he goes on to tell us in what ways by the father's gift he is equal to God. Verse 21, as the father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the son gives life to whom he will.

The father judges no one, but is given all judgment to the son, that all may honour the son just as they honour the father. Whoever does not honour the son does not honour the father who sent him.

[14:29] So Jesus says, like the father, he can give life, resurrection life, and like the father, he is humanity's judge. In fact, all judgment is in his hands.

For the father's will is that he, Jesus, the son, shares equal honour with the father. Now, they're extraordinary claims, aren't they? Jesus says he is the authority on judgment, the one who should be listened to, the one who can tell us what will really happen then, because he is the one who will judge on that day.

There can be no higher authority. But is there any reason why you or I or your neighbours should trust Jesus' estimate of himself?

People of Jesus' own day asked that and Jesus spoke in response of testimony, testimony, of witness in verses 31 to 39.

And that's of course the language of the courts. So you think, how do you establish something as true or false in a court of law? Work out whether, for example, Joe Bloggs really did hit Bill Smith with a piece of 4B2.

[15 : 45] Well, how do you work that out when, as was the case in Jesus' day, there's no CCTV or forensics or records on mobile phones?

Well, you worked it out by the evidence of witnesses, the testimony of witnesses. You reached a conclusion by evaluating the evidence of the witnesses.

Now, Jesus says that you can come to a conclusion about him, about who he is and whether or not he should be listened to and believed by considering the testimony of the witnesses that he lists for us here.

He starts by acknowledging that if his first hearers only had his word, well, that would not be binding. If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not deemed to be true.

He acknowledges that. But he says there are other witnesses! And he goes on and lists them. Four other witnesses you see here in the text.

[16 : 51] The first is, verses 33 to 35, John the Baptist, somebody they recognised as a prophet of God. You sent to John and he has borne witness to the truth.

Oh, then, verse 36, Jesus says, there is the works the Father has given him, the works the Father has given me to accomplish. The very works that I am doing bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.

You know, the healings, the feedings, the casting out demons, the raising of the dead. All bear witness to Jesus' truth. Then in verse 39, he says, the scriptures, you search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life and it is they who bear witness to me.

The scriptures which for Jesus first hearers were God's word. Jesus was fulfilling the promises contained in them, promises given hundreds of years before. And finally, verse 37, he says, there is the witness of the Father who sent him.

The Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. For the Jewish people of Jesus' day, Jesus is saying that both recognised authority, the scriptures, John, and their experience of his mighty works, told them that he was telling the truth about himself.

[18 : 15] But you or your neighbour might say, that was back then, what about now? Well, those witnesses still speak. We know more, for example, of Jesus' fulfilment of the Old Testament than Jesus' audiences did then because we have seen how he has fulfilled it in his death and rising.

But more, today we have the witnesses of the apostles, those who lived with Jesus throughout his ministry, who knew him and who gave us eyewitness reports of what he said and did.

They tell us of what God did to confirm the truthfulness of Jesus' message, these eyewitnesses. They tell us God raised Jesus from the dead and that they saw him, talked with him, touched him and ate with him alive after being killed.

And you can read their witness for yourself, John 20, Luke 24, Matthew. You see, that resurrection is God saying yes to Jesus in a way only God can, for only God can raise the dead, saying yes he is my son, yes he tells the truth.

Now some want to dismiss their witness because it comes from almost 2,000 years ago. Now why? Were these people any less reliable in telling the difference between the living and the dead than we are?

[19 : 37] Of course not. In fact, they are probably much more familiar with death than most of us. In fact, I heard a speaker the other day say that in Australia, somebody can grow to be 30 before they see a dead body.

That is definitely not the truth, not the way it is in first century Palestine. They knew the difference between the dead and the living much better than us. And God only needs to raise Jesus once if it is witnessed by credible and reliable people who stick to what they say.

And if their testimony is accurately recorded for people of other times and places as it is in the Gospels, God doesn't need to keep having Jesus killed and raised again over and over.

Once is enough. Think about it. How many times do you need to break the world 400 metres record to be proclaimed the world record holder? If you run your race before the right people under the right approved conditions with the approved timing devices, you only need to do it once, don't you? And if you did it in Australia, would you need to repeat it in, say, Scotland or the US or China to be recognised as the world record holder? No.

[20 : 55] If you have credible and reliable witnesses, you only need it to do it once. Jesus only needed to die and rise once.

God witnessed to the truthfulness of what Jesus said by raising him from the dead. And God still witnesses to the truth of Jesus today by entrusting Jesus with authority to give the Holy Spirit to those who trust him.

See, the experience of those who trust Jesus today, who receive his spirit as he promised, witnesses to the truthfulness of what Jesus says. They have proved the truthfulness of Jesus in their own lives, in the experience of forgiveness, of answered prayer, of changed lives.

Today, the evidence, the witness from history, the apostles' witness in the New Testament documents, the evidence of recognised authority, Jesus' fulfilment in scripture, the evidence, the witness of his people who know God's work in their lives, all tell us Jesus should be listened to because he tells us the truth.

In repeating what Jesus says about resurrection and judgment, I'm telling you the truth. When you are repeating it to your friends and neighbours, you are telling them the truth, for you are saying what the authority on life and judgment says.

[22 : 29] Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out. Those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

That is a reality. And that means that everyone has a problem because none of us are good. I don't know about you, but where I live, people have a tendency to divide the world into good people and bad people. Where good people generally are those who agree with us, especially on social media, and bad people are those who don't.

But actually, we're all bad. We all sin. We have done things that deserve condemnation and we all die.

Thankfully, declaring the reality of resurrection and judgment is not the only word Jesus speaks. He didn't come to earth just to tell us we had a problem.

[23 : 35] And if we're honest with ourselves, we probably know that we, humanity, has a problem already. A problem with the way we treat each other and a problem with the death that comes to us all.

We knew that, didn't we? Whether it was because we've seen the hurt our actions have caused others or know the hurt the actions others have caused us or whether we've been lying in weakness in a hospital bed or sitting in grief in a funeral chapel.

We may not have expressed it the way, the problem the way Jesus does. We may not have thought it as serious as Jesus does, but we already knew we had a problem.

And Jesus didn't just come to tell us that. Jesus is more than a fire alarm. He's the fireman who leads us to safety. He came to tell us there was a solution.

Verse 24. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

[24 : 42] Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.

And he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man. See, Jesus came with a message from God which he says, if believed, will spare us from God's just condemnation and give us eternal life, a life at peace with God, a life that knows no death.

What is this word that the Son of God speaks that can bring life to the dead, to those living in a world characterized by darkness, lies and death?

He who hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life. What is that word? It's the word about Jesus and what he's done, that he is the one sent from the Father, the one who speaks the truth of God, the one who gives his life in death on the cross to give us life.

It's the gospel word. Now, Jesus spoke again and again of that death and how through that death he would bring life to all who would believe in him.

[26 : 06] And so in John 3 he says, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

And then in John 6 he says, I'm the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I'll give for the life of the world.

Oh, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The one who hears this word, says Jesus, and believes that this word that he speaks is the word of the living

God, who believes that this is God's word, because Jesus is the Son of God sent from the Father, doing his will, come to save through his death.

The one who hears, says Jesus, my word, and believes has eternal life. Notice that has, not will have, has, now and forever.

He or she will not be condemned. They have already passed, says our Lord, from death to life. And so as you gather, and maybe you've gathered many times, do you this evening hear Jesus' word spoken to you?

[27 : 32] Do you believe Jesus when he speaks, when he promises life? For not all who heard Jesus believed.

In fact, Jesus warned that believing isn't easy, even for those who had the witness of the scriptures. In fact, those who were perhaps most familiar with them.

Verse 39, he says to his hearers, you search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness to me. Yet you refuse to come to me, that you may have life.

Now why wouldn't they come and believe? Was it some deficiency in the evidence, the evidence Jesus has just listed? No, says our Lord, it was their hearts.

I do not receive glory from people, but I know that you do not have the love of God within you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. How can you believe when you receive glory from one another, and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?

[28 : 45] For all their religion, their focus was not on God and what he thought of them. They had no love of God in their hearts. See, they didn't want God or the Lord he had sent in control.

They did not want to give themselves to his will. Rather, they valued winning the approval and praise of their peers, being well thought of by their friends and colleagues above God's approval. Their religion, even their reading of scripture, was about their reputation in the eyes of others, not pleasing God. Just as your sitting here could be, only God knows your heart.

what holds you back tonight? If you don't yet believe, what holds you back from believing? Perhaps you tell yourself it's a commitment to reason.

But reason says that if God raised Jesus from the dead, it is right to trust him. And when the transmission of the evidence and the content of the testimony of the apostles is examined, it is reasonable to believe.

[30 : 01] we have eyewitness testimony to his resurrection and that the explanation the apostles give, that they speak of Jesus' resurrection because God raised Jesus from the dead, is the most reasonable explanation for what they've experienced.

If you doubt that, come and talk. But if you're not yet believing Jesus' word, consider whether the problem is not the evidence, but your heart.

fear of losing the approval of others, or a desire that it not be true so that you won't have to change, so that you won't have to stop doing what God forbids and you want to do.

Is the problem your heart? Do you want it not to be true so you can choose a different life? If that's you, think where the reason itself won't accuse you on the last day.

And if you're uncertain about the words of Jesus, examine the evidence afresh. Find out more. But many of you, I'm sure, do by God's grace believe Jesus' words.

[31 : 13] And believing, know you have eternal life and you will not come into judgment but have crossed from death to life. Isn't that a wonderful thing to know?

To be able to say to yourself, I will not come into judgment, knowing it is not because you are good or outstanding in any way, but because God is gracious and has given his son to be the sacrifice for your sins.

If that is you, if you know it true to be true, let your faith in Jesus show by honouring Jesus, God's son.

That is the father's will. The father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the son, that all may honour the son, just as they honour the father. Whoever does not honour the son does not honour the father who sent him.

It's the father's will that we honour the son. So let your faith show by honouring Jesus, by giving him with the father your worship, the praise that is due to God, singing his praises.

[32 : 27] Oh honour him, by loving him with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, the love that is due to God, and in loving him, being committed to conforming your thinking, your speaking and

acting to his will, following him by doing what he says.

Oh and honour him by being willing to stand apart in this unbelieving age. Standing apart by saying that the true God can only be known and worshipped where Jesus is confessed as his son, and where the son is not confessed, there is no true knowledge of God.

Honour him by saying that the religions of the world or the heresies that deny Jesus is the eternal son of the father are not worshipping God, or pleasing to God, and there is no life in them.

Honour him by being willing to stand apart from the intellectual fashions and social consensus that denies Jesus. And yes, honour him by living with a confident hope that will both die with courage and pay with joy the cost now of confessing Jesus as the son of the father, equal to the father in doing the work of God, that will pay the cost with joy, because you know his word has given you life, and it will raise you to life.

Oh, and honour him by speaking this word to all, because you believe it gives life, and Jesus can give life to all.

[34 : 11] He has that authority to your family, your friends, to all who will trust him. And so it should be stated boldly.

People should be warned that there is a resurrection to life and a resurrection to judgment, and that Jesus can rescue us.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

I pray that that is your confidence as you leave here, and as you think of your future and your end.

Your good Saviour, save you by his word.

Believe it. Let us pray. Let us pray.