

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 24 May 2020

Lord God, we wish to see Jesus. By your Spirit's power, give us eyes to see his glory. Through Christ, we pray. Amen.

John 17:1-17; Acts 1:6-14

Are you living the eternal life? – Part 1

Immortality is one of the things that human beings haven't achieved yet. The desire to find a way to live forever has been continuing for a long time. In China, Qin Shihuang, First Emperor of China, was one of them. Survived assassination attempts countless times, he began to seek a way to gain eternal life. His vision of a lasting dynasty was founded on personal immortality, so death was unthinkable. The emperor himself certainly believed that he would be able both to live and to reign forever, and continuously sought elixirs which would guarantee eternal life. He was willing to accept the tales of magicians and alchemists to a remarkable extent.

In the present time, the efforts to live forever are continuing. In the desert climate of Scottsdale, Arizona, there rest 147 brains and bodies, all frozen in liquid nitrogen with the goal of being revived one day. It's not science fiction. Thousands of people around the world have put their trust, lives and fortunes into the promise of cryonics, the practice of preserving a body with antifreeze shortly after death in hopes future medicine might be able to bring the deceased back. The CEO of the Scottsdale-based Alcor says that they see death from a different perspective. "when we call someone dead, it's a bit of an arbitrary line. In fact, they are in need of a rescue."¹

The price range is from US\$80,000 to \$200,000 depends on which body part you want to preserve. Some people may choose their heads only, while others may prefer the entire bodies. When we live without dying, does it what eternal life mean?

Eternal life is one of the crucial faith elements in Christianity. In John 17:2, Jesus says that God has given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom God has given him. ² What is eternal life for you as a believer, by the way? Is it a life that continues forever after we resurrected from death?

At some stage, Jesus says that there will be two different resurrections. He says, "Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation."³ Jesus says even more perplexing words: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Here he calls himself by his name – Jesus Christ. Overall what does it mean? It seems that finding out who Jesus is, is crucial to understand all these subsequent questions. Any believer may have a particular understanding of who Jesus is. So it is what we will do through the scriptures. So 'who Jesus is' will be our sole focus today.

Who is Jesus?

If anyone asks us who Jesus was, what's your short answer? We can answer it by quoting Paul's words from Letter to the Galatians, "...when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children."⁴ Paul tells us that knowing Jesus means knowing/believing his words and deeds. The same goes in John's gospel too. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone, who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24). It becomes clear that knowing Jesus is knowing what eternal life is. We'll do it through the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

A lawyer asks Jesus, "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds to the lawyer's question with two questions. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The lawyer cites a verse from Deuteronomy 6:5 (You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind), and one from Leviticus 19:18 – (love) your neighbour as yourself. Jesus agrees

¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/innovation/company-will-freeze-your-dead-body-200-000-n562551>

Retrieved 21 May 2020

² John 17:2 καθὼς ἔδωκας αὐτῷ ἐξουσίαν πάσης σαρκός, ἵνα πᾶν ὃ δέδωκας αὐτῷ δώσῃ αὐτοῖς **ζῶην αἰώνιον**.

³ John 5:28-29

⁴ Galatians 4:4-5

with the lawyer, saying, “Do this, and you will live.” Then the lawyer follows up with a second question: “who is my neighbour?”

The lawyer’s question, ‘who is my neighbour?’ shows us that he sees himself capable enough to love his neighbour. For him, the only thing remains is to identify who his neighbour is so that he can fulfil the law. It is when Jesus begins to tell him the parable of the Good Samaritan. The lawyer together with the first-century audience, it may be a little bit of surprise. For the Jews, Samaritans are despised inferior others who are even called 'dogs.' In the parable, when such noble compassion expressed by a Samaritan and not the pious Jewish layperson would have come as a surprise to the lawyer.

And there is always a hidden upside-down element in Jesus’ parables, and this is no exception. The neighbour in this parable is the one we may least expect to be a neighbour. In Luke, the ‘compassion’ that the Good Samaritan shows is only used for none other than God and God’s agent, Jesus. The word ‘he was moved by pity (NRSV)/‘he had compassion’ (ESV)/ ‘he took pity on him’ (NIV) *esplagnisthe* (ἐσπλαγγίσθη) occurs three times in all of Luke. In the other two examples, only God’s agent, Jesus (Luke 7:13) and a figure for God, the father of the Prodigal (Luke 15:20) show compassion. In other words, “showing compassion” in Luke’s gospel is a display of the divine power and divine action. In this parable of the Good Samaritan, the act of compassion on the man in the ditch is functioning figuratively as God’s agent.

The injured man who is half dead is unconscious. Otherwise, he wouldn't receive any help from the Samaritan at all. This man’s condition – half dead and unconscious only display a total inability, and Jesus calmly reveals that it is the current spiritual state of all people in the world. Regardless of the outward appearances, such as lawyer, or scribes, or priests, scripture makes it clear that no one can keep the law entirely under the heaven because “... whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”⁵

At this point, we have to re-read the passage to understand it better. When the lawyer asks Jesus, "who is my neighbour?" Jesus asks the lawyer in return, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The three means that a priest and a Levite who pass by the man, and the Samaritan who comes to rescue him. By reshaping the lawyer’s question, Jesus is pointing out that the lawyer himself is the man who fell into the hands of the robbers. And the stranger – the Samaritan is Jesus himself. If so, what is the lawyer robbed and who is the robber(s)?

In *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis, the central figures are Screwtape a senior demon who holds an administrative post in the bureaucracy of Hell and acts as a mentor to his nephew Wormwood, an inexperienced and incompetent tempter. There are 31 letters in the book which were written from devils’ viewpoints. In the letters, Screwtape gives Wormwood detailed advice on various methods of undermining God’s words and of promoting abandonment of God in “the Patient,” who Wormwood is in charge with guiding him toward ‘Our Father Below (Devil/Satan) from ‘the Enemy (God).’ In Screwtape’s advice, selfish gain and power are seen as the only good, and neither demon can comprehend God’s love for man or acknowledge human virtue. It is not merely one writer's point of view. In scripture, we read the same points.

The apostle Paul says that we are dead when we follow the course of the world and the ruler of the power of the air.⁶ It means that the lawyer was robbed by Satan, and it was God who Satan took from him. The sole purpose of the robber – e.g. the serpent in the garden of Eden, is to rob God from us. The condition of half-dead ((ἡμιθανῆ) symbolizes our inability to attain eternal life by keeping the law perfectly, or by following the course of the world, or by finding elixirs or medicine or through cryonics or beyond all of these. All these conditions make us dead, and it is like robbed by robbers and left half-dead on the deserted road.

The road to Jericho is a land of danger. For the Samaritan, he has to risk his life to rescue the half-dead (ἡμιθανῆ) man. He is in danger not only by the robbers who can appear at any time but also by the Jews who are so hostile to Samaritans. When Jesus calls the lawyer to “act like Samaritan,” Jesus says that in the real offence of the image of the Samaritan is a Christ figure. He came to the world to rescue the children of God who are robbed and left half dead. If so, what shall we do? We will continue in part 2 next Sunday. We will see what it means to believe in Jesus Christ and to live the eternal life. May God help us prepare ourselves for this. Amen.

⁵ James 2:10

⁶ Ephesians 2:1-2 - You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the Spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.