

# FAITH ASKING QUESTIONS



A ST FRANCIS COLLEGE SHORT COURSE

THE TRANSCRIPT

## Episode 6 Life, death and what comes next

### 6.1 What do Christians believe about destiny and fate?

**Jazz Dow:** Christians believe many things and they often contradict each other and we often argue about these things and they often cause big arguments between Christians and so the very nature of this question is challenging and there aren't easy answers, perhaps that's why we have so many, and I have so little!

**Marie-Louise Craig:** I really believe that I was created by God and so I have this sense that I'm not a mistake, I think that's really important to me. I think that God makes us unique and individual so all of us have a giftedness and a personality to actually do the job that we've been put here to do – that sounds like I'm just a mechanical thing but I'm not, the personality is really important in that, so I think that in order to live a fulfilled and happy life I need to engage with the things that are me and I think that's not fate, that's an intentional thing that God does for us so its not by accident. And if I manage to do it, I have a great time. I really love Psalm 139 "he knit me together in my mother's womb" there's that idea that he's crafted me in a special way. Makes me feel really important.

**Cameron Venables:** Well I think that's a very interesting question in that we have a very significant belief that god has created us in God's image and God gives us a choice. And I think the choice piece is at odds with the idea that we have a predetermined path to travel and I think there's a real gift in that. So, I think God's there with us in the choices, no matter what choices we make. Sometimes we make good choices, sometimes we don't...not so often in my case.

Some people think that God has a plan for them and they use the language of God being in control and I struggle with that to be honest in the sense that we have a deep foundational belief that life is a gift from God, we are made in God's image and that God gives us choices and so when we choose, we are not puppets on the end of a string with God pulling us one way or the other. We make choices about our life. The great thing is that God is with us and loves us, no matter what the choices are.



## 6.2 What does the Christian tradition, the Bible the story, the church, believe happens when someone dies?

**Cameron Venables:** When somebody dies there's a biological piece obviously that all the little atoms that make up our body break down and we go off into being recycled into other things which I really like. The Bible teaches us that somehow there's something that's essentially us that goes on and whatever happens next we understand that we are going to be accountable in some way. So, when Jesus speaks about judgement there's a sense of being accountable for our actions. Interestingly I think Jesus doesn't say we'll be held accountable for what baptism we had, for what our sexuality was, we will be accountable for how we responded to human need. Matthew 25 speaks really clearly – when we responded to people who were hungry, when we responded to people who were thirsty, responded to the stranger, so I think there's a real mandate for us to use our lives in ways which respond compassionately to people who have need, and whatever the next piece is, God will take care of it.

**Marie-Louise Craig:** This one's a really personal one for me because twice I've nearly died so I've had the experience of actually – well the first time I didn't even understand what was happening and it was 6 weeks later that I realised and I don't think I processed it very well. But the second time it happened was at the birth of my last child and I haemorrhaged and they tried to fix me using a method I'd already told them I was allergic to. So things went really drastically wrong and I was coming and going in consciousness and in the conscious moments I didn't like what was happening to my body I was worried what would happen when Gary was told I was dead. I really prayed and I had a sense of peace that God was in this so I didn't know whether I was going to live or die at that point in time but I just felt at peace that if I had to walk through this door that it would be ok.

So that was a really good thing but at the same time, the processing afterwards came with the idea of birth, so it was at the birth of a child, but in a sense, I connected that with my birth into another life. So I thought about what it was like for a baby to be born and they have no idea what's going on and it's painful and it's awful and they don't know what's at the end of it, but it's a good thing that's at the end of it and I just said to God "I don't like this process, but I'm ok about the destination". For me that was a really life changing experience that I realise that it was a doorway to somewhere else and it wasn't the end. I always knew that in my head but now it was a real experience that I would actually step through into the extension of the life that I already had.



**Jazz Dow:** For me the life, death and resurrection of Jesus gives us the biggest hope in this area – that death is not the end that death is transformed by life, it doesn't disappear, we still experience the pain and the suffering and the grief of death but we have been promised that it has been transformed...that the sting of death has sunk itself into the heart of God – so God knows what the pain of death feels like. God is a god who knows what it is to be human because God chose to become human – to know that and to show us that death is not the end and that there's hope and so for me the biggest thing that the Christian tradition teaches us about death is that there is life beyond death...that there's hope.

### 6.3 Why do people have to die?

**Cameron Venables:** Biology would suggest we are finite beings and that ourselves eventually have a use by date. There's something within our DNA which will cause us to go "ok we're good" and so biologically we come to an end and the next generation comes up. I'm kind of glad about that actually, the thought of being 1000 years old would be too much. So there's something inbuilt within us that means we have our time and then we die so that the next generation can come up.

**Jazz Dow:** I feel like silence is the appropriate answer to that question because again it comes back to that sense of mind of God, mind of humans and in a big sense, I have no idea. But we can grapple with the answer and acknowledge that to be human is to be fully human and to be part of the created order. The earth dies and lives and dies and lives. So life is amazing. We've got relationships, we've got joy, we've got food – we've got all the good things of life but life comes with pain and death-experiences. So death isn't only not breathing anymore and being buried, the body giving up. Death is also grieving, when someone else dies, when poverty hits, when we lose a job, when we lose a pet, when we experience the depths of humanity that is so painful. Yet someone reminded me (Peter Catt on the "On the Way" podcast recently, listen to it here: <https://omny.fm/shows/on-the-way/on-the-way-the-cruciform-pattern>), he was speaking of the cruciform pattern – life shows us that there is always a way to transform out of pain, that the day always comes from the night. So, why do people have to die? I don't know why people have to die, but I know it's part of being human. And that life will always come, the sense that the earth dies in order to bear fruit. Maybe death is something we don't give enough time to see its gifts.



**Marie Louise Craig:** This is a really hard question and when I talk to people about it I decided that we have to be really sensitive to what it means to them for people to die, but I think the best way to answer this for me is that same idea that death is a gateway. I remember preaching once (and this is really funny) my youngest son always answered my rhetorical questions in my sermons...very embarrassing sometimes. So one day I said a question something like "how do you get to heaven?" and this little voice comes from the congregation and says "well, you gotta die first" and it really distilled for me that we often see death as a medical problem that we need to stop, but ultimately death is part of what happens to people and so when Andrew said that it's just so jolly logical – to get to heaven you've got to die first – so it's that gateway idea I was talking about (q2) but then I thought about how does that feel if I'm the one that's left behind? And is a life long enough? You know when children die, or when someone has just finished university, they've got their whole lives ahead of them and how do they die? How do we cope with that?

I go back to Psalm 139 where it says all our days are numbered. So if I remember that God has a set period of time for each person, I don't know what that set period of time is for any person in my life but I trust that he has got that in place – that's part of my assurance. So I have an older sister who died when she was 41 and coming to terms with that was really difficult, and being very angry with God for a long time, but I'm a long way from that now and I look at it and say "Well we learned so much from the way she lived her life" and there was so much that she contributed to us that was not wasted because of what we did after she died. But we still miss her. Do people have to die, well yes, it's part of the way God designed us. How we deal with that will depend on every death that we have to face, because some deaths are a release, and it's a good life, and some deaths we just don't get.

## 6.4 What do Christians believe about heaven and hell?

**Jazz Dow:** Again, many things, there is no simple answer to this question. There are many things!

**Marie-Louise Craig:** You know when people say that, all that heaven and hell stuff, I think of all those jokes where people get up to the pearly gates and have to do something to get in but the other thing I think about is the interesting story Jesus tells about Lazarus and the rich man and he actually talks about Lazarus being next to Abraham and it's nice there, and the rich man is in hell and there's fire and thirst and he's obviously distressed and that's in a story Jesus tells, so ok, what do we do with that? Is there a heaven, is there a hell? And I guess, doing a lot of thinking about it I don't like beating people over the head with hell, so I would



rather they focussed on heaven and had a good thing to aim for rather than something to run away from. That's a more positive way to think about it.

**Phillip Aspinall:** "Life, death and what comes next?" It's a bit of a mystery. Again, like all religious questions, people have struggled to absolutely pin it down. But the new testament gives us a number of glimpses of what its like. First of all, I think there is something. Secondly I think it's about being with God. There's that wonderful passage in John's gospel where Jesus uses the image of the middle eastern caravan scout – the one who goes ahead of the camel train to make sure the water's there at the next camping spot and everything's organised – the caravanserai – Jesus describes himself as that. He says "I am going to prepare a place for you – in my Father's house there are many dwelling places", "I go to prepare a place for you and then I will come and take you so that where I am you will be also". So that's one image of what's to come, of our destiny – being with God and being with Jesus.

**Cameron Venables:** I think there are some very interesting images of heaven and hell and how we understand that is often shaped by paintings from the 15th century where you've got that great divide where God is just the other side of the cloud, and hell, the hot place is just deep underground and you don't want to go underground, you really want to go up! So, if you look at Michelangelo's Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel, there's God on a throne, and a little dove and Jesus the muscular judge separating, and the devil's pulling people down into a dark place who haven't made the grade.

Obviously, the ancient mind had that understanding of a three-tiered universe (just the other side of the clouds was heaven and underneath was hell) and that has made its way into the Bible. Writers of the Bible generally thought that the earth was flat and that the sun went around the earth and that the earth was the apex of creation. And now we have a world view which is informed by science, so we have to reframe our understanding of what heaven is and what hell is. So for me heaven is not a place just the other side of the clouds.

Who knows how those astronauts felt as they looked back on the earth – they didn't see angels flying around! For me heaven is a place with great relationship with God. A place in which only love is present, and if you like, hell is the absence of that. Its distance and coldness and numbness, so the opposite of love.

**Phillip Aspinall:** Another one that fills us with hope I think is in the book of Revelation where it talks about a new Jerusalem coming out of heaven, the transformation of everything we know in a new creation and we know that is on the way because of the resurrection. Jesus being raised is the "first fruits" the first sign of that new creation and the assurance that its on the way. So revelation talks about a new creation in a new city



where God will dwell with people when every tear will be wiped away and all the short comings of life as we know it now will be transformed and everything will be made whole – so that’s another glimpse. But exactly what it will look like, nobody knows. Paul talks about we are sewn a physical body and we are raised a spiritual body so some of those things are not entirely clear, but I think we will be, and we will be with God is the heart of it.

**Marie-Louise Craig:** So, I say there are two things I know about this and the first thing is that what I decide in this life now is what I get when I walk through that gateway. We all learn John 3: 16 but we don’t always remember John 3:17 and John 3:18 (and I paraphrase) what I do with Jesus decides what happens when I walk through that gateway. So, if I decide what I’m going to do with Jesus here and I accept what he’s done for me then I don’t have to worry about hell, but that’s me personally. What do I do about people around me? It’s out of my pay packet to judge whether they are going to heaven or hell. I’m not paid enough for that so I think it’s important that I give people a hope of a future rather than worry about the negative side of that. I don’t think the Bible is hugely clear about that, is just a story Jesus tells as illustration and there’s no real mapped out theology about it. Go with read John 3 16, 17 and 18 and work on that.

**Jazz Dow:** One thing that I believe is that heaven starts now, there’s a Catherine of Sienna quote “All the way to heaven is heaven.” So eternal life starts now. So, if God offers life, that life doesn’t change, that life is life in abundance and that begins now so in one sense, what heaven looks like isn’t extremely important to me except to say that it’s about the fulness of life. But that’s not a life beyond this life only, that life needs to inform this life and so we need to live as if this were heaven “your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

## 6.5 My loved ones don’t believe in God. What can I say when they are faced with death and dying?

**Cameron Venables:** Well, I think when people die, inevitably, we grieve, whether we are Christians, or we are not Christians. If we have a belief as Christians that the only way that we can be with God after death is through faith in Christ, then we would possibly grieve more deeply because we think that somehow, we are going to be separated from those people who mean the world to us. But if we have an understanding that God’s love is infinite then I think there’s something exciting to explore there. My sense in terms of talking with others about that is that God is love and in that God’s love they and us will find a home after we die.



**Jazz Dow:** When I was a teenager, 15, my stepdad died, and my foundation rocked considerably. His story was one of growing up in a Christian family but the time I knew him he was always critical of Christian faith. He would very lovingly mock my own Christian faith but then in my early teenage years he turned on Christian music, but he would still profess to having no faith, so there was this small shift in him towards something spiritual. When he died very suddenly of a heart attack playing football, so it was completely unexpected, they were questions I asked as a 15-year-old in the Church...what does it mean? Is he in heaven?

But I have to believe, and I do believe that this stuff isn't for us to dictate and that God again, has a heart for the other, God has a heart for us for the earth and so never is God going to turn someone away from his face unless they want to be turned away. I firmly believe that Mick, my stepdad is in life in abundance, in the presence of God.

**Marie-Louise Craig:** And so psalm 103 is a good place to sit, from verse 8: "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, he will not always accuse nor will he keep his anger forever – he does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquity for as the heavens are high above the earth so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father he has compassion for his children, the lord has compassion for those who fear him for he knows how we were made, he remembers that we are dust."

This is such a beautiful idea of God that what he wants for us is that we would know his mercy. I go then to a Matthew passage (Matthew 18:18) where it says what you release on earth will be released in heaven and so for those people I say if you release them, then God will hear you so no matter what they've done in their lives, if you release them God will hear you and so he will release them. That's all we can say at this point because my pay bracket is a little too low to make those decisions, but I think there is hope.

**Cameron Venables:** Sometimes I hear people say that their loved one has been taken by God and this has been a particular challenge when families have lost children through accident or through disease. Well-meaning people say "Well obviously God wanted to take them now" or "They've gone to a better place" as though their family and their home is not a good place. And I'm very uncomfortable with that. And sometimes that is tied up with the "God is in control" so God, for reasons beyond our comprehension decided to pluck that person. I don't believe in a God who does that in a random scary sort of way. I'm much more drawn to the image of Jesus weeping at the death of his friend Lazarus. I believe in a God who weeps with us and holds us up when we want to fall down, so I don't believe in a God who randomly kills people, otherwise we'd walk around constantly terrified





**Jazz Dow:** Part of being a priest is having the privilege to journey with people when they experience the pain of death whether it be dying themselves or experiencing losing someone and it is not uncommon for me to hear things like “It was meant to be”, “God willed that”, “Why did God take my loved one?”, “Why is God taking me?” (Although that’s very rare to hear - most people I meet on their death bed are very peaceful and very ready...not everyone, but most people who’ve had time to travel that journey are very peaceful.) But for those who sit on the other side of death, the remaining side of death, they are big questions...because it hurts, it really hurts and we very fairly become very angry at God, or we look for someone to blame and that is super normal. I don’t believe God takes people; I don’t believe we are puppets in God’s ultimate pantomime.

I think that God has a heart for us. Catherine LaCugna’s theology of the Trinity is that God is always for us. (<https://booko.com.au/9780060649135/God-for-Us> ) So there’s a YES to humanity. There’s a YES to the earth and so that idea that God would take people from people in some sort of transaction or whatever form it takes, doesn’t sit right with that – it’s not comfortable, it’s not something I can believe. I believe God holds people when they are in the suffering, I believe when we do die God holds us and keeps holding us beyond death but I don’t think God takes us from the people we love.

## 6.6 What hope does the Christian faith offer about what comes next?

**Jazz Dow:** The Jesus story tells us about God living amongst us, being born as one of us, travelling the depths of life, travelling the hopes of life, the joys of life, literally dying on a cross and then death being transformed in the resurrection. So, for me that’s the ultimate hope that death’s been transformed, that death has lost its sting. And yet God knows the suffering as well, so that brings great hope to me and yet transforms it – doesn’t eliminate it, doesn’t delete it because it’s part of our story, it’s part of what makes us us, and so to take our identity is the ultimate sort of pain isn’t it, the ultimate death. We see peoples’ identities stripped constantly and it’s painful and it’s dehumanising, so to be human is to have an identity which is found in God because we’re created in the image of God but the hope in that is that death is transformed, so our suffering is transformed into hope.

**Marie-Louise Craig:** I often think about heaven – when I was a kid I hated it when they used to say, you know you’ll be praising God forever, and my idea of sitting in church all the time, that really didn’t appeal to me! But as I’ve got older I realise that heaven is so much more than that, it’s a rich place. In my head I say what would I like heaven to be like...there has to be libraries because there are going to be so many books I





haven't read that I want to read. I want there to be libraries, I want there to be an orchestra I can play in and a choir I can sing in, where they don't care if I sing out of tune and I want a place where I'm not having to argue about – you know that argument in your head, should I do this, should I do that, what's the right thing to do? – because I believe that in heaven we are no longer tempted and so there isn't that struggle anymore, it's a place of rest, but not a place where you're just sleeping, it's a place where we're able to live without the constant questions of life and I think no sadness there's a joy in heaven.

My sister when she was dying didn't want to go because she didn't want to be the first to go and then her uncle on her husband's side and our uncle on our side of the family died and they were both party animals. Then she said "Yes, party, let's get there" so she was actually ready to go then because of her sense of hope that there was a party in heaven. And so I think if I was going to say what hope can I offer people – that death is not the end, it's just the doorway to the next part of our lives and that that part is always going to be all of the stuff that is good...that we can look forward to good.

**Cameron Venables:** That's probably the toughest question because the reality is that we don't know. We just don't know what comes next and I think sometimes when I hear Christians speaking about the value of faith it's almost that the real value of faith is what happens after we die. Which is kind of tricky, because I think of the words of Jesus recorded in John's gospel chapter 10 vs 10: I came that they might have life, and life in all its fullness, right now.

Somehow actually salvation is not just about what happens next after we die, it's actually about now, our relationships now, our relationship with God now, with creation now, so the short answer is I don't know what happens next but I believe in a God who loves me and loves all of humanity so God will take care of that – what is more important is what can we do and how can we experience God now and share that?

**Bruce Boase:** One of the things I've learnt since I became a priest is that at a death bed, the one thing that people are thinking the most about is what happens when I die? If they are able to talk, they will articulate that, and I have to give them the kind of the assurance that our sacraments can do. If they can't talk, with is quite often the case too, you can see it and feel it in their being. And their loved ones are asking the questions. It is a concern sadly for a lot of people they wait for the last nano second. But of course, in God's time that means nothing. If you can repent right up until the last nano second and truly do that as we are called to do then I believe that your afterlife will be with God, with Jesus. It's not for me to say that you will go to hell if you do anything really nasty, because the choice is ours right up.



You can find the videos of these sessions, along with reflection questions for individuals or groups at [www.stfran.qld.edu.au](http://www.stfran.qld.edu.au) under “SFC Short Courses—Faith Asking Questions”.

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