

Where is God in the face of death?

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[0 : 00] Our first reading this morning is from Isaiah chapter 25 on page 708. Isaiah 25.

O Lord, you are my God. I will exalt you. I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.

For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin. The foreigner's palace is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt.

Therefore strong peoples will glorify you, cities of ruthless nations will fear you. For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down.

[1 : 11] On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.

For the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Behold, this is our God. We have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord.

We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, and Moab shall be trampled down in his place, as straw is trampled down in the dunghill.

And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it, as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim. But the Lord will lay low his pompous pride, together with the skill of his hands.

[2 : 22] And the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down, lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust. Our second reading is from 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verses 50 to 57.

It's on page 1158. I tell you this, brothers. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

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.

Oh, death, where is your sting? Sorry, oh, death, where is your victory? Oh, death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

[3 : 42] But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, thank you very much. May I add my warm welcome to Simon.

My name is Benji. If you don't know who I am, please do come say hello to me. At the end, I'm one of the assistant ministers here. Why don't I lead us in a prayer as we begin? Dear Lord, we come to one of the ultimate climaxes in your scripture, one of the absolute high points of what we see of you and your great plans for this world.

Father, please, would those of us who are familiar with victory over death not be called to it this morning, and for those of us who are not trusting in your Son, would we see, and would they see, the reality of death swallowed up forever in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Amen. Amen. I am terrified of death. It's not something I particularly like talking about for obvious reasons, but it's true.

Without a doubt, it is beyond anything else the thing I fear personally most. And if I'm being really honest, it's the thing that probably occupies my thoughts more than anything else.

[5 : 04] It's a trope and a cliché, isn't it? To talk about death being the ultimate statistic, one out of one people die, but it's true.

It's true. And sometimes, if I'm being really honest, and don't worry, this isn't going to break down into a therapy session of mine, but if I can be really honest, I can find myself becoming incredibly nihilistic in my worst moments.

The world doesn't seem to have any answers at all to death. And whenever you look around the room, any room, the reality of death is always there. Everyone we know will one day die, and that is painful, or at least I find that very, very painful.

I was on the tube recently, and a very good-looking guy opposite me was reading a book called *The Nordic Way to Add Ten Years to Your Life*. I am Nordic, so I was intrigued about what my people may have come up with.

So I looked it up to see what this book encourages you to do, and shockingly, it encourages you to exercise, sleep, eat well, and rest. But I couldn't help struggle but not move past the title.

[6 : 18] I found the title really uncomfortable. Because whilst we as human beings are very optimistic, aren't we? very optimistic about what we can achieve, this book isn't optimistic at all, in fact.

It's not optimistic at all. Because nowhere in the book, and I checked, that was a waste of £2.99 on Kindle, nowhere in this book does it tell you how to not die.

It doesn't tell you anywhere. It never makes the claim. The things that it encourages you to do, eat, sleep, rest, well, they don't stop you from dying, and it doesn't make that claim once.

They can just those things, and only potentially, only potentially, push the date of your death back a little further. Maybe even ten whole years.

And really, we know this, don't we? If you speak to any doctor or nurses in the room, and there are quite a few here this morning, they'll tell you exactly the same. A doctor is never successful.

[7 : 16] Sorry, doctors. A nurse is never successful. Sorry, nurses. Ultimately. All they're doing is giving people a little more time. We all lose eventually.

And a book I've been reading recently for my CBT stuff is called *The Denial of Death*. The Denial of Death. It's a secular book. It's a fascinating book. It claims that a fear of death and wanting to escape it is at the heart of all evil in the world.

All evil. People, the main thesis is that people cannot bear the idea that they do not last, so they desperately attempt to create for themselves any kind of legacy they can.

Any kind of legacy. So whether or not it's Putin creating a new Russia or a parent wanting to make sure, like my mother-in-law, that we have lots of babies, all of us are trying in some way, somehow, to last.

We know, though, if we're honest with ourselves when we hear that, that we are grasping at straws. Proverbs is right to say better an alive dog than a dead lion.

[8 : 22] Who cares? Who cares if you're famous or had a huge family when you're in the grave? The answer, according to this book, is to accept that death is natural and that it's coming to us all.

Natural and coming to us all. But that's just a lie, isn't it? It just is a lie. Death is not natural. It is vile, heartbreaking, perverse, painful, final.

It is the great statistic for a reason and it is, without doubt, man's greatest enemy and greatest obstacle. Now, man has done lots of very impressive things, lots of very impressive things.

They've overcome diseases, they've overcome COVID, sort of, they've overcome technological limitations. Everywhere you look are such wonderful accounts of what human beings can achieve. But none of them, and I've looked, not a single one has ever or will ever escape death.

It is the final and great and ultimate enemy of man. And it begs the question, and this is a question that I've asked myself many, many times in the dark moments in the night when I feel afraid, where is God in this?

[9 : 42] Where is he? If God is all-powerful, as I believe that he is, if he's almighty, as I tell other people that he is, if he's all-good, which I'm sure he is, and ultimately, if he's in control of everything, where is he?

Where is he in the face of death? Where is he in the face of man's greatest enemy? Where is he? Where is he? This leads me on to my first point, which is God's greatest victory for now.

God's greatest victory for now. We've been seeing in this section, for those of us who haven't been with us the last couple of weeks, we've been seeing this section, God showing himself in judgment and power.

We've been seeing God humble the world and exalt himself. And this chapter, at the kind of climax of this section, running from 13 all the way to 27, this section, we see the great victory song of God's people at the defeat of Assyria.

Have a look with me at verses 1 to 3. O Lord, you are my God, I will exalt you, I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure, for you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin, the foreigner's palace is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt, therefore strong peoples will glorify you, cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

[11:06] In other words, God has finally defeated the great enemy of God. We've been seeing that Assyria has been destroying everyone that they put in front of them and God has acted finally in history to save his people.

And this is really hard, right, because I can see, I can see all of you from the front, it's a wonderful privilege, so I can see who nods off and I can see who looks disinterested and I know as soon as I start talking about ancient history, the glaze comes down, I'm with you, okay, I understand.

It's very hard for us to wrap our head around why we should care that God defeated Assyria. But Assyria, with its god-killer king, had rocked the ancient world.

Egypt, gone. Edom, gone. Moab, gone. Philistia, gone. Cush, gone. Ethiopia, gone. Israel, gone. Judah, almost completely gone.

But it wasn't just the fact that the Assyrians were so good at war, they were also brutal, brutal in how they practiced it. Many of you will know, as Christians, we like to wear little crosses.

[12:10] Some of you are wearing one today. I lost the one that was hanging from my earring, I was very upset about that. And crucifixion is without doubt, I think though, the most horrendous torture method ever devised by mankind.

It's unspeakably evil. So evil, in fact, that Roman citizens were not allowed to be crucified, and you weren't even allowed to talk about it in polite Roman conversation.

Men would have nails driven through their wrists and feet and hung on a piece of wood for days. To breathe, they would have to push themselves up on their deformed feet and arms until eventually they couldn't anymore and died by asphyxiation.

It is a vile, vile way to murder people. So what would it say about a nation who invented such a practice? What would it say about them?

Because crucifixion did not originate with Rome or with the Greeks, but the Assyrians. In other words, the Assyrians were so evil, so good at war, that even Rome learned from them.

[13:10] There's a fact to go in the history books. But therefore, note how complete the Lord's victory is over them. Verse 3, therefore, strong peoples will glorify you.

Cities of ruthless nations will praise you. Why would they do that? Well, because look at the enemy that God has defeated. The Lord's victory will be so total that the strong people and the nations of the world will fall down and worship.

It says an awful lot, doesn't it? Again, we're still in ancient history time, very, very sorry about that.

But it says an awful amount about the power of our God that he could do this to such a nation.

That not only does he direct them, he determines their successes, but also their downfall. God's greatest victory for now. Because, and I wonder if you felt this as I was speaking or when you've been doing your quiet time in Isaiah.

Certainly this is something that I've been trying to think through and wrestle through. Yes, we have a very powerful God, but who cares? Who cares? What good is that for us today?

[14:19] What good is that? Sure, it's wonderful to see that God is powerful. It's wonderful to see that he does just and good works for his people. But what good is that to us?

Because sure, Jerusalem, 1,000, no, almost 3,000 years ago was saved from invasion. But where are they now? Those people that were saved by God.

Where are they now? Those people on the walls as they saw God defeat Assyria. Where are they now? Well, they're dead. If God cannot deal with death, if he cannot defeat that enemy, then us gathering this morning to hear about him defeating Assyria 3,000 years ago is at best irrelevant and at worst cruel.

If God can't defeat death, well, then I'm afraid he is no better than the doctors in this room or the Nordic self-help book that I wish I could get a refund for. Yes, he's good and powerful, but ultimately, he's impotent.

God's greatest victory for now. And so that brings me to my second and final point, which is God's greatest victory, death defeated.

[15:30] God's greatest victory, death defeated. We come now to some of the most precious verses in all of Scripture and certainly in those moments when I've been doubting my faith and struggling, these have been the most precious verses to me in my struggles with death.

We've been focused, so focused in these verses and in this history on Assyria up until this point. Nation after nation has fallen. It's gritty. It's visceral. It's very here and now.

Yet suddenly and inexplicably the here and now gives way. It gives way. The turn in verse 8 would have felt like a hammer blow.

It will be said, he will swallow up death forever and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth for the Lord has spoken.

The darkness is lifted and the light breaks in. Isaiah takes the war and the pain and the victory and the freedom and he intensifies it to a white hot point so much so that suddenly we are not on Assyria anymore.

[16:41] We are not on the here and now anymore. Suddenly death itself is in view. Suddenly God's victory is for all people and for all time.

The defeat of the great evil the terrible enemy of God. In other words why have all this stuff then Benji about Assyria? Why bother? Why not just tell us that God is going to do away with death and be done with it?

Well it is because friends Isaiah and God is using Assyria as a metaphor. A metaphor. If you want to know people of God what God will do with his enemies and what he will do with the great death itself you can look to Assyria.

The destruction of the greatest nation in ancient history is just as far as God is concerned just a metaphor so that we can know how powerful he is.

What does it say about our God that he can use the downfall of an empire as a simile for his character? He will swallow up death forever and wipe each tear from our eyes.

[17:47] Are there any more beautiful words in all of scripture? I think not. And I simply want us to spend the rest of our time this morning in those verses. Now as some of you will know I've been trying to talk to some of you about this chapter because I've really struggled.

I've really struggled with just the sheer momentousness of these verses. I'm desperate that we feel the weight of them that these don't just kind of roll over our heads. And so I thought maybe I could share my prayer as I was trying to meditate on these things and these verses for myself over the last few days.

I want us to think of our Father the Lord on a hill the hill of death and we are walking up that hill. We'll climb that hill of death and we are travelling there now.

We will one day stand on its mount and we could not see over the edge of the mountain in this life but when we reach it you will take our hand and show us from the summit we will look out upon your kingdom and see the infinite multitude of your people.

They will be singing your praises and what is it that they will be singing? Well wonderfully we had that reading didn't we from 1 Corinthians 15 they will be singing O death where is your sting?

[19:07] O death where is your sting? We will taunt in other words together the great enemy of God. We will taunt the great enemy of man. That enemy by the way that if we're all honest with ourselves has robbed us of so much taken so much from us blighted us made us afraid taken loved ones too soon we will taunt it in one song.

To think Lord of the lives that death has ruined to think of the great blight of sin that has befallen our creation the brokenness the heartbreak the pain the anguish and to know that one day that will be over.

And Lord you get this really strange image don't you when we're thinking through this you swallow death up forever Lord you swallow it up forever why on earth would you swallow death?

It's such a weird visceral metaphor I wonder if you thought that as we read it well it's because the Lord did not just defeat sin he took it into himself man when he swallows death and will swallow death every single one of us when we swallow it there is nothing left death swallowed entirely

consumes us yet the Lord Jesus Christ he swallowed death for us he took the cup and drank it to the dregs Jesus Christ on the cross tasted death for us he died but then he rose conquering death forever he didn't just defeat death he took it into himself death is forever in God forever defeated forever removed and I really don't and I really as I say wish and my great hope is that we would feel the weight of these verses that we would feel the reality that when we see

Jesus for the first time when we have died and we have met him we will praise him specifically for being the king who tasted and swallowed death who spurned the grave for us who tasted the most bitter of drinks we will join the victory song of death with the saints of old imagine friends standing next to Paul one day next to Paul and bellowing glory glory to the lamb who was slain we will stand next to Peter one day one day we will stand next to Peter and we will never deny Christ again we will stand next to Stephen and see the stone wounds on his body for dying for our Lord and we together will praise with him the one who has defeated death we will stand with the women who first know the Lord Jesus Christ the little girl who died and who Jesus took by the hand and raised from the dead we will stand with Lazarus and hear his story of how he heard the voice of Jesus and lived or do we not just long friends to walk his courts to see the sapphire floor and the temple of glass that he's in to bathe in the river of eternal life to feel its cool ebbs and flows to see the saints of old and the saints we once knew renewed yet themselves to have fellowship with them forever to know that there is an infinitude of glory to come to know that when we've been there 10,000 years we will not have moved a second closer to an end of that time with you there will never be an end imagine knowing that it will never be taken away never blighted by sin never have to feel the painful and confusing pang of a broken and temporal world because there'll be no more there will never again be a goodbye there will never again be a concept of missing anyone never again will loved ones leave us never again will sickness blight us never again will death have its mark funeral directors will be no more mortuaries will not exist morticians will be redundant doctors will be worthless medical advice never needed yearly screenings of cancer gone vaccinations gone gps gone the nhs will never need a single more pound of funding research into diseases will cease no more aging cream no more zimmer frames and stair lifts no more pains and aches no more wrinkling no more deterioration no more cot death no more miscarriage no more pain no more crying no more crematorium no more cards of condolences no more wakes no more black tie suits for funerals no more gravestones no more graveyards no more scattering of ashes no more final words and no more bedside confessions no more death no more death no more death in fact friends

[23 : 54] I don't even think there will be tear ducts in heaven because our eyes will have been forever dried by the thumb of our Lord he will bend down and we will look into his face as he lovingly gently reaches to our eyes and dries away our tears death which has affected so much for so long will forever be gone forever be gone and never will return all of this won for us by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ Christ I only really have one point of application for us as we close and it's the thrust really of this entire chapter which is to rejoice now that might sound like a really strange application given that I fear death and I'm sure some of us here do too that we should rejoice rejoice it feels so kind of like that's the right Sunday school answer but really it's a bit wet and a bit impossible how can we rejoice but Assyria gives us confidence the cross gives us confidence we do not have a God who makes empty promises and then does not act all of us here are a breath away from eternity all of us we all have the veil of death hanging over us this side of heaven none of us know what is on the other side and that is why we can rejoice because God does not just tell us to hope he doesn't just say trust he shows that he is trustworthy over and over again he shows that he is trustworthy the defeat of Assyria predicted in advance the birth of Jesus predicted in advance the death of Jesus predicted in advance the resurrection of Jesus from the grave predicted in advance again and again and again

God says and then God does God says and then he does he is wholly trustworthy so for myself when I fear the great pangs of death which sadly is a daily occurrence the fear that comes as I think of my own mortality or see the aging of loved ones my response should be and I will endeavor to make it so to turn and rejoice rejoice because my God my God has defeated death and I will one day see him face to face and on that day how could I do anything else other than praise because there will be nothing to ask for anymore there will be no sickness to pray for there will be no hardship to go through there will be no spiritual dryness no lack of God's presence there will be nothing ever to pray for again other than to praise

God face to face I cannot wait for the day where I never have to close my eyes again in prayer I'll want to keep my eyes open forever I think I'll probably even hate to blink in heaven because I won't want to tear my eyes away from God who will be right before me we'll not have to clasp our hands bow our heads close our eyes to speak to God because all we'll have to do is look up to him and speak and he will be there ever before us our husband our chief delight instead of faith we'll have sight instead of hope we'll have certainty instead of pain we will have everlasting joy how could we do anything other than praise anything anything other than praise his glorious and eternal name why don't I lead us in prayer dear lord I thank you so much for these beautiful and precious words father please would you make them real to us please would we be able to live this entire life rejoicing that death has been forever defeated amen