

The resurrection and Christian service

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- [0 : 0 0] 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 place 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, as the song of the ruthless is put down.
- 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.
- [1 : 1 5] 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.
- A straw is trampled down in a dunghill. 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 with the skill of his hands, and the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down, lay low and cast to the ground, to the dust.
- [2 : 2 3] 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.
- 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.
- Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

[3 : 40] Well, one of the features of our post-Christian society is the absence of hope, a society that places its confidence in rationalism, in the power of reason, and in experience, where truth is determined by what I can see, and by what I can feel and experience.

It means, of course, that in the face of death, our society has no answers. So you look at a corpse, and what does it tell you? It tells you that death is the end.

That is what reason tells you. You look at a corpse, what does it tell you? Well, experience tells you that, well, nothing, because you can't both experience death and tell others about it at the same time.

And therefore, deprived of any sense of where we are going, it is not surprising, is it, that our culture simply lives for the now and screams at us, live for today.

It's all you've got to live for. John Lennon expressed it brilliantly in his song, Imagine, imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky.

[4 : 53] Imagine all the people living for today. If there's no heaven and hell, if there's no future beyond the grave, then today is all there is to live for.

And the same thought is expressed in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 32. If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

But wonderfully, John Lennon was wrong, as no doubt he has by now discovered. We've seen over these last three weeks in 1 Corinthians 15 that there will be a bodily resurrection, that everyone will be raised before the judgment seat of Christ.

Indeed, that death is the precondition for transformation and receiving, as we saw last week, our new resurrection bodies. And that we can be certain of all of these things, everything in 1 Corinthians 15, because of the historic reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

It is a wonderful chapter, so if you've missed any of the talks, do listen to them online. And now in these final verses, verses 50 to 58, the Apostle Paul shows us how to live in the light of the wonderful reality of the resurrection.

[6 : 15] And you'll see there's an outline on the back of the service sheet. We're going to think, first of all, about the sting of death, then the victory of Christ, and then we'll spend most of our time thinking about a purposeful life.

So first of all, the sting of death, and Paul's point here is simple. It is that it is impossible for anyone to get to heaven as we are in our present state.

Verse 50, I tell you this, brothers, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the perishable. They all can inherit the kingdom of God without the transformation of their earthly bodies into new resurrection bodies.

This is almost the language, isn't it, of an invitation. So you get an invitation to some event. There's the RSVP written at the bottom. But also at the bottom, perhaps there's a dress code as well.

And if it's a lovely day like today, then it'll be shorts to barbecue. But if it's a smart dinner, then it might be black tie or something like that. And Paul is saying, without the right clothes, without the transformation of your body into a new resurrection body, then no one gets to heaven.

[7 : 25] And the reason for that is verse 56. The sting of death is sin. And the power of sin is the law. Notice the problem isn't death itself.

After all, I guess there are plenty of people, aren't there? You speak to friends or colleagues or whatever. And I guess there'll be many people who'd be perfectly happy with the idea that after death there is nothing. Yes, they'll say I'm content with that.

To live my life and then get to the end and that is it. Nothing. But no, it is that, verse 56, death has a sting.

And that is sin. So you'll remember, the very reason death came into the world was because of sin. Death is God's judgment on sin.

At the beginning of the Bible, Adam rebelled against God, deciding that he would be the one who would decide how to live in God's world, what is right and what is wrong. It's how all of us live, in solidarity with Adam.

[8 : 26] And so all of us naturally follow Adam to death. In other words, the real problem that we have is not death as such, but sin.

But you say, why is sin so powerful? Well, because, verse 56, the power of sin is the law. When the Lord Jesus was asked, which is the greatest commandment, he replied, the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your minds.

That, of course, shows us, doesn't it, the standard of perfection that God requires to allow anyone into heaven. To love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our minds.

And, of course, as soon as we hear those words, we know, don't we, that we fail. Every day we fail, regardless of how respectable and decent we think of ourselves. In other words, you see, God's law does two things.

The first thing God's law does is it shows us sin for what it is. So, you see, imagine you're driving along a motorway at 90 miles an hour. Now, in a sense, there's nothing wrong with driving along the motorway at 90 miles an hour.

[9 : 39] The problem is, though, the law says the speed limit is 70 miles an hour. By driving at 90, I am breaking the law. It is the law that shows me that driving at 90 is illegal and, therefore, I am guilty.

The second thing the law does is it makes it clear that I deserve to be punished. In the case of driving at 90 miles an hour, that I deserve to have some points on my license and a fine.

In the case of sin, that I deserve the judgment. After all, God is holy. He is righteous. He's the perfect judge. The power of sin is the law.

It pronounces each one of us guilty before a holy God and deserving of judgment. And, therefore, you see, when the Apostle Paul speaks here in verse 56 of the sting of death, he's not referring to what I guess many people might think of the sting of death, which is the physical pain of death or the fear of death or the anxiety of death or being separated from loved ones and so on, awful as those things are, but, rather, the far worse sin, the far worse sting, rather, of dying unforgiven and of standing before God on the final day as an unforgiven person.

That is the sting of death. Back to verse 50. I tell you this, brothers. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

[11 : 22] Let me just ask, have we grasped this, that none of us can get to heaven without this transformation that Paul talks about? Perhaps we compare ourselves with others.

Perhaps we imagine ourselves to be better than others. in some way. Well, we may well be, but we still fall far short of God's holy and righteous standards.

Or perhaps we're so used to hearing about sin, I guess this is the danger for many of us, perhaps we're so used to hearing about sin that actually it barely registers. We no longer take it seriously.

Well, the resurrection of Jesus points the day when all be raised to life to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Left to our own devices, the verdict is clear.

It is impossible for anyone to enter heaven. The sting of death. But secondly, and wonderfully, the victory of Christ.

[12 : 21] Verse 51, Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. Now, the word mystery here doesn't mean spooky, like, you know, in a children's cartoon or something like that.

Rather, the word mystery means what it generally means in the Bible, which is that it is something which only God can reveal because only God knows, and he has now revealed it.

And the we in verse 51, well, the we in verse 51 that Paul is talking about is the same people as in verse 57. It's those who are trusting in Jesus.

So what is Paul saying, verse 51? We may not all sleep, sleep being the standard New Testament language for death. In other words, not every Christian believer will have died by the time Jesus returns.

If he returned this afternoon, then I take it that we, well, I guess some of us, one of us might have been, but it would be very unlikely. If he returned this afternoon, none of us would have died before he returns.

[13 : 24] But Paul's point is that even though that is the case, even though not every Christian will have died by the time Jesus returns, nonetheless, all those who are trusting in Jesus, whether they've died already or whether they're still alive, all those trusting in Jesus will be transformed, raised to new life in God's kingdom.

Well, you say, when is that going to happen? Verse 52, 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.

It's how Jesus described the final day of history, the day of judgment, the trumpet will sound, marking the end of time. And the point being here, the twinkling of an eye, how long does it take for you to blink?

You see, the point is, it's the immediacy, isn't it? The suddenness of the fact that Jesus will return, the speed with which, at that moment, everything will be transformed.

And the point is that then, those who belong to Jesus are clothed with new resurrection bodies. Verse 53, for this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

[14 : 45] And then, verse 54, 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.

because death, because God's plan has always been the end of death, to swallow death up forever. And that is why the end of verse 54 there, death is swallowed up in victory, is a quote from Isaiah chapter 25, which we have, had read earlier.

So can I ask you just to keep a finger in 1 Corinthians 15 and turn back to Isaiah chapter 25. It is the most wonderful chapter. Isaiah 25, on page 708.

Here we are, 700 years before the birth of Jesus, and God speaks through the prophet Isaiah about death being swallowed up. Verse 7, this is what the apostle Paul quotes, God 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. It's a covering that is cast over all people, it's a veil that is spread over all nations, no one escapes its touches. But God is pointing forward to a day when it will be swallowed up forever.

[16 : 17] In its place, in God's heavenly city, there will be a great banquet. In God's heavenly city, there will be a great banquet. In God's heavenly city, verse 6, 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.

It's very physical, isn't it? It's a very physical, concrete description of heaven, of the new creation. I take it we're almost meant to smell the wine and see the food in our mind's eye.

Death swallowed up. And therefore, the consequences of sin, not only sin itself destroyed, but no more consequences of sin, no more tears, verse 8, either.

The Lord will wipe away tears from all faces, because not only will death have been swallowed up, but also the consequences of sin. And what will people be saying on that day?

Verse 9, people will be saying, Behold, this is our God. We've waited for him that he might save us. This is the Lord. We have waited for him.

[17 : 30] Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. What are people going to be saying on that day? The waiting is over. It's a wonderful thing, isn't it, when you've been waiting for something for a long time?

You know, that's a holiday. Or a birthday. Or whatever it is. And finally, the day has arrived. The waiting is over. And that is what we will be saying in the new creation on that day.

Well, back in 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul continues, verse 55. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?

Here, I think, are two pictures of death. The first is death as a sort of playground bully, a playground tyrant at school.

Death sneers at us. It is the ultimate statistic. Ten out of ten die. Death says to us, I'll have you one day. But death, the playground bully, has now been defeated by one much stronger.

[18 : 41] And so, as he slopes away into his corner, rather than death the playground bully taunting us, we, with the Apostle Paul, can taunt him.

Where is your victory? You're defeated. The other picture of death is that of a bee sting. Imagine a little child playing in the garden.

It's lovely. It's summer's day. The sky is blue. The air is still. Suddenly, he comes running to a parent, terrified. Daddy, daddy, I'm being chased by this bee.

And the father puts his arm around the little child. The little child feels safe. He feels his father wince from the sting of the bee. And the father says, it's fine.

It's safe. You're okay. Verse 55. Oh, death, where is your sting? The sting of death has been drawn.

[19 : 40] Death is now harmless for those who trust in Jesus. And notice, really, that all this that the Apostle Paul is talking about, it's all experienced in the presence, verses 56 and 57.

Because Jesus died on the cross on that first Good Friday, because he rose again three days later from the dead, those who trust in him, we share in his victory today.

Yes, we don't have new resurrection bodies today, but nonetheless, we can join with Paul today in rejoicing that death is defeated. And so you see, Paul concludes with great confidence, verse 57.

But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. I wonder where you stand in relation to the victory of Jesus.

If we are his followers, he shares that victory with us. Yes, death taunts us, and I guess there may be some of us this morning, perhaps we feel that in a very particular way at the moment.

[20 : 47] The process of dying may still be painful for those who follow Jesus, yet we can taunt back confidence that Jesus has dealt with our sin, confident that one day we will stand before him in the new creation.

So, the sting of death, the victory of Christ, thirdly, a purposeful life. Verse 58. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Now, this is really the application, I think, not just of 1 Corinthians chapter 15, but actually the application of the letter as a whole. And the issue is this, what are you investing your life in?

What are you investing your life in? Because, you see, Paul doesn't simply write 1 Corinthians 15 to straighten out their misunderstandings, to straighten out misunderstandings about what the resurrection will be like, how it will happen, and so on.

Rather, he writes this chapter to address the spiritual disease that threatens the church in Corinth. What is that disease? Well, it is the disease of worldliness.

[22 : 09] It is the disease, their desire to fit in with their culture and to fit in with what the world around them thinks. To look impressive like the world rather than to look weak and foolish, which inevitably, Christians always look weak and foolish because we follow a savior who was weak and foolish and went to a weak and foolish death.

So, what is the Corinthian disease? The Corinthian disease is, you see, they are claiming on the one hand to be Christian and to be followers of Jesus. But actually, in terms of their life and aspirations, they are simply living like the world around them.

And therefore, the big question, verse 58, is, what are you investing your life in? Is it something purposeful, genuinely purposeful, or is it actually in vain?

I wonder if you can relate to this quote from the autobiography of Chris Boardman, Chris Boardman, the Olympic cyclist who won a gold medal at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992.

And yet, six years later, he was able to write this. By 1998, he says, I realized I needed to go faster, be better, but I had reached my limit.

[23 : 28] I was beginning to realize that I had invested my entire life in a very focused vision. And for the first time, that it might not be worth the price.

Is that not a very honest thing to say? Is it beginning to dawn on him that what he'd invested his life in simply wasn't worth it?

Just like King Solomon in the Old Testament, fabulously wealthy, yet time and time again, as we read in his autobiography, the book of Ecclesiastes, what is it he tells us?

He tells us that whatever he invested himself in was ultimately without meaning. Whether it is work and career, or a beautiful house, splendid gardens, or whether it is pleasure, wine, food, travel, whatever else it was, or the next big project that he had his sights fixed on, at the end of each of these experiments, so to speak, which he conducts to work out how to find meaning in life, what does he conclude?

Vanity. Meaningless. Now, I take it that you and I need to stop and pause at that point, don't we? Because actually, those are the very things, aren't they, which so often prevent us from abounding in the work of the Lord, 1 Corinthians 15, 58, chasing after all the things that the world chases after.

[25 : 00] So contrast Solomon and his refrain of vanity, meaningless, with the Apostle Paul, 1 Corinthians 15, 58, writing after the death and resurrection of Jesus, therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Not in vain. What do you say? What is this work? What is this labor of the Lord? Well, I take it it's gospel ministry. Paul uses exactly the same word of work in chapter 16, verse 10, as he describes the ministry that he and Timothy are doing, for he is doing the work of the Lord as I am.

Ministry can often look in vain. Results of a rarely instance. It is costly, costly in terms of resources, time, energy, but it's worth it.

Teaching, Sunday club. It's hard work, isn't it? Trying to work out what the Bible is saying, trying to work out how you're going to illustrate it, all that cutting and chopping and pasting for the illustrations, praying, but it's worth it.

Reading the Bible one-to-one, which James was telling us about earlier. Again, it's costly, isn't it? It's costly relationally, as you kind of summon up the courage to ask someone. It's costly in terms of time and energy.

[26 : 36] It's worth it. Being committed to a Christian union at school or university or a Christian group at work is worth it.

Using our precious annual leave to serve, perhaps to go on a Christian summer camp or something like that is worth it. Reducing the number of hours that you work in order to do more ministry is worth it.

You see, abounding in the work of the Lord, not because I'm on a rota, but because I'm convinced it's not in vain. It's worth it. But the danger, of course, is that we're not steadfast, just like the Corinthians.

Perhaps the temptation to drift from one church to another, never really giving ourselves to serving Jesus in one place. Or perhaps treating church as a spectator sport rather than treating church as a family with people to serve and be committed to.

Or perhaps at work we've never really identified ourselves concretely as followers of Jesus. Or perhaps we find ourselves in a sense having two different existences. So there's one me over here where I'm prepared to say I'm a follower of Jesus.

[27 : 47] But then at work or with some friends or family, there's another me over here and I never talk about Jesus. No, says Paul, be steadfast.

Well, what does that mean, verse 58? Always abounding in the work of the Lord, giving ourselves to serving Jesus. When? When am I to do that? Verse 58, always.

How much am I to do it? Abounding. Fully. I take it it means we need to be willing to give things up, to give things up that the world says are important for the sake of serving the Lord Jesus.

Here's the missionary Jim Elliott who famously said before being martyred by the Orca tribe in Ecuador in 1956, he is no fool who gives what he cannot gain to keep that which he cannot lose.

because our ultimate focus in life and at every stage of life is to be the work of the Lord Jesus, the work of the gospel, regardless of what else we have going on in life.

[29 : 01] This is what it means to be a disciple. See, remember Paul is addressing the whole church in Corinth. He's not simply addressing the leaders or one or two particularly keen Christians.

He's addressing everyone. everyone. This, he says, is what it means to be a disciple, which means, of course, that whatever is going on in life, whatever other commitments we have in life, this is to be our ultimate focus now that Jesus has risen from the dead.

In other words, what is the evidence that you and I really believe the rest of this chapter? How would we know whether the church in Corinth actually believed what the apostle Paul has been writing in this chapter about the resurrection of Jesus, about the reality of life in the new creation and new resurrection bodies for those who trust in Jesus?

Well, is it that they would sit in a sermon and mentally tick off the boxes and say to themselves, yes, I believe that, and I believe that, and I believe that. I believe that Christ died according to the scriptures.

I believe that he was raised again three days later according to the scriptures. Well, no. No, the real test is the life they live. The real test, likewise, of whether we really believe this chapter is not being able to sort of tick the boxes in terms of what I believe.

[30 : 25] The real test is the life I live. See, am I steadfast? Am I seeking to abound in the work of the Lord, knowing that the work of the gospel and serving the Lord Jesus is never in vain?

I take it the reason why he has to say it's not in vain is because it often feels as if it is in vain. It often feels as if there are other things which we would be better investing our time and energy in.

Paul says, no, it is not in vain. Well, if you're here looking in on the Christian faith, I hope you can see the wonderful victory of Christ, the wonderful promises for those who put their trust in him.

Perhaps you're asking, is it then worth following Jesus? Is it worth serving him, being a Christian? Well, yes. Jesus raised from the dead, never to die again.

He offers new life to those who belong to him. Death is now defeated. And of course, that new life starts now. Yes, it goes on into eternity, but it starts now.

[31 : 45] And verse 58, it is a life of purpose as we seek to serve him because we know that our labor of him is not in vain.

well, why don't I pray and we'll have a few moments for reflection before that, and then there's time for questions if anyone wants to ask a question.

Let's pray together. for I deliver to you as a first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for these wonderful truths of first importance, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thank you for the implications for all those who trust him and follow him.

Thank you for this promise of new resurrection bodies. Thank you that death has indeed been defeated. We're sorry, Heavenly Father, when like the Corinthians, we on the one hand believe in these things and yet continue to live like the world around us lives.

[33 : 12] And we pray that we would indeed be those who would always abound in the work of the Lord, knowing that our labor in him for his gospel is not in vain.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.