

# Christ the firstfruits

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Preacher: Chris Lowe

[ 0 : 00 ] Sophie, thank you. Forgive me for starting straightaway without any fluff or general introduction. Beyond death, what? Beyond your death, after you've taken your last breath and die, what?

! What? What will happen for us? What can we expect beyond our death? You know, I know, we live in a world that's so dead scared of dying and death that we rarely ever talk about it. And yet it's so, so obvious that death is coming to us all in a world where all die. A while back, I enjoyed, I am a little bit strange sometimes, I enjoyed reading this book. It's called Necropolis, A History of London and It's Dead. I read it a bit on the tube in London and no one wanted to sit next to me as they saw it. It's a book about London and death and the author, Catherine Arnold, says that London is one giant grave. Let me tell you what she means. When St Paul's Cathedral was rebuilt in 1666, as they dug the foundations, they went down below the most recent graves and they discovered amazingly below lines and lines of Saxon graves.

[ 1 : 22 ] And they kept digging and they found early British burials. And even further down, 18 feet or so, Roman urns and remains underneath London, layer and layer of death.

Apparently, the underground Piccadilly line tunnel between Knightsbridge and South Kensington takes such a huge curved route, because when they were trying to build the tunnel, quote, it was impossible to drill through the mass of skeletal remains buried in Hyde Park.

So, having described what lies beneath London, she then says this, listen. Meanwhile, we have carved out a place for ourselves among the dead.

The glittering pinnacles of commerce rise above the skyline. Their foundation sunk in a house of bones. The dead. And the lost life forgotten below us as, overhead, we persuade ourselves that we're immortal and carry on the business of life.

That's such a striking image to me. Below the surface, bones and skulls, layer upon layer, and above, a city of people running around desperately trying to pretend death won't happen.

[ 2 : 43 ] But it will. So, what will happen beyond death? Some people say, nothing. You die, you rot, darkness, the end.

Might feel like common sense, that. You've just got to face up to reality. Our existence, just a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness.

If that's true, then the passing of time now for us is absolutely terrifying. And so you'll either desperately try to extend your life with face cream and health checks and feeling young, or you'll just have a blowout and enjoy yourself before the darkness comes.

And so you'll be able to see that. And so you'll be able to see that. Beyond death, nothing. Or maybe, beyond death, something we hope.

Maybe we live on in some kind of way. Our souls. It's what we want to believe in Britain today, I think, and try to believe.

[ 3 : 53 ] I'd love to think that you go to a better place. Or daddy's one of the stars looking down on you. And from a Christianish angle, call it heaven if you want.

Somewhere floaty and wispy where my soul goes and it's positive somehow, I hope, a vague hope to hold on to. What do we think?

Beyond death, nothing. Beyond death, something floaty. Or could it be, thirdly, beyond death? Could it be bodily resurrection? That was the old Jewish belief, the God-given belief in the Old Testament.

Listen to this, Isaiah 26, verse 19. I've put this verse on the sheet if you're following along. Could you imagine this? But your dead will live, Lord.

[ 4 : 52 ] Their bodies will rise. Let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning.

The earth will give birth to her dead. There's nothing wispy or vague about that. Talking here about the resurrection of the dead.

Could that be possible? That is you, your body rising from the dust of death. You wake up and you shout for joy.

And your heart beats in a new restored body as you stand and feel the ground beneath the feet again. The resurrection of the dead.

I mean, if that were to happen for us beyond death, how utterly life-changingly wonderful. Don't you think? Imagine how that might impact us now.

[ 5 : 55 ] I would fear death less, surely. I wouldn't need to obsess about my health, desperately trying to live longer now in this brief crack of light.

I wouldn't need to enjoy myself to the max before the nothingness. I would fear death less, surely. I would fear death less, desperately trying to live. I would fear. I would fear. I could serve my God till my dying day because I have solid hope for this life and the next.

But, well really? I mean, who could seriously believe in the resurrection of the dead?

Could you? The skeletal remains in Hyde Park rising. Don't make me laugh. And you and me, dead, buried or cremated, then made alive again.

You think to yourself, that's wacky, isn't it? That's silly, unbelievable Christian stuff, surely. Well, that's what we're talking about this morning in 1 Corinthians 15.

[ 7 : 08 ] It's what Paul's talking about. Here in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is writing to a first-century church family in Corinth in modern-day Greece. And there is something they do believe.

They believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Tick. We believe that. In 1 Corinthians 15, that's first-important gospel truth set out in verses 1 to 10.

That on the third day after his crucifixion, death and burial, this having-been-cold-and-dead man was himself raised physically and bodily, his heart beating, the Lord Jesus Christ as he stood and felt the sun on his face once more.

Yes, he was raised. And he was seen by Peter and the twelve and hundreds of witnesses and Paul. They touched him and ate with him, ate with him, the miraculous, certain, in history, bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

They believed that about him. But when it came to them, when it comes to us, and our own personal beyond-death experience, talk of resurrection just felt unbelievable, really.

[ 8 : 29 ] It says Paul in verse 12, if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

I think it is genuinely possible for some of us to be in this position today. I'm happy with the resurrection for Jesus all those years ago.

I believe he was raised for sure. But when it comes to me and you and those whom we love, when we die, I honestly struggle to believe anything like that for us, for me, that I will be raised bodily.

I'm in verses 12 to 19 that's safely read. Paul says, honestly, if you say there's no resurrection of the dead, then the whole Christian faith falls apart.

But now this morning, in verse 20 onwards, Paul speaks positively. He speaks positively. He wants to persuade his first readers.

[ 9 : 36 ] And he wants to convince you and me that because Jesus has been raised from the dead, you will be too.

Let me say that again. Because Christ has been raised from the dead in the past, so one day beyond your death, you too will be raised from the dead.

For those who believe in and belong to Jesus, you can know with absolute certainty today, because Christ has been raised, you will be too.

I want to be convinced. I want to be persuaded. That's what Paul's doing here. Two things to say this morning. To start to persuade and convince us of our own future bodily resurrection.

Here's the first thing. In verses 20 to 23, Christ was raised. He's the first fruits of many.

[ 10 : 42 ] Let me read from verse 20. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn, Christ the first fruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him.

There are stretching ideas in these verses. But first off, do you see how Jesus is described here twice? He's the first fruits. You know what that is.

Imagine. Imagine you own an orchard of peregrine peach trees. And it's early August in the evening sun and you go out to your orchard and the branches are heavy with ripe looking fruit.

And you reach up and you cup one in the palm of your hand and it lifts off. And you bite in easily to the soft flesh. And you feel the sweet juice of the peach running down your chin.

[11:58] And you think to yourself, the peach harvest is here. It's ready. And you go back indoors with your one half eaten drippy peach and you say, look, the first fruit.

And to the family around the table, this first fruit in your hand, it signals that there's more to come out there. There's many more. It's guaranteed. The trees are ripe.

They're ready. There are basketfuls and basketfuls of ripe peaches on their way. A bumper harvest of peaches just like this one.

And they're ready to come off the tree so very soon. That's what the first fruit is. And Paul says in verse 20, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who've fallen asleep.

He is the first human to rise bodily.

[13:03] And Paul says as the first fruit, like the first ripe peach from the tree, his resurrection from the dead guarantees there's more to come.

Many more. Basketfuls and basketfuls, in fact, there's a bumper harvest of human beings just like him, who will rise bodily just like him.

Because he is the first fruits. Now, I guess to that you might say, well, you might say, OK, thank you.

That's a nice picture. It's a nice illustration. The juicy peach, first fruity harvest thing. But does that really connect with reality? Can Jesus's resurrection really be bound up with ours like this?

I mean, you get the picture of the first fruits thing, huh? What happens for the first fruit peach will happen for the rest. Because we're all peaches together.

[14:09] So are you saying, Paul, that what happened for Jesus Christ will happen for the rest of the dead? Because we're bound up with Christ in some way, like peaches?

And Paul says, yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. And that's verses 21 and 22. And take a deep breath. I'm going to read this and we'll think about this for a moment.

Paul says, for since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. What's he saying? Think about death, first of all.

How come there is death in the world? How come we all die? The Bible says here, death comes from one man, from the first human.

[15:12] When in the garden of Eden, Adam turned away from God and sinned against him, death came into the world through him. Such that now, verse 22, in Adam all die.

Do you see that? One man, a first fruit of death, and through him all die. Paul says this is reality in our world.

That like an infection, death has spread to us. Death has spread to us because as a human race we're kind of bound up in a bundle with the first man, Adam.

Born as one of his descendants, we sin like Adam. We die in Adam. That's how death works in God's world, through one man.

He's the first fruits of death which comes to us all. That is, like it or not, by nature we are bound up with the first man.

[16:22] And what happened to him, happens to us all. That's true. And it's bad. But now think about resurrection and life.

The point is it works in the same way. But it's good. Since death came through a man, in the same way the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

Do you see that? There's one man, Jesus Christ, who was raised, the first fruits. And through him, the resurrection of the dead.

So that, verse 22, as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. It is possible now in your life to be bound up in a bundle with this second man, Jesus Christ.

You believe in him. You put your faith in him. You join his family. You are a peach like him. You find yourself no longer in Adam, but in Christ.

[ 17 : 36 ] And in Christ all will be made alive. That is how resurrection and life works in God's world. You and I can be bound up with this second man.

So that what happened for him in the past will certainly happen for us in the future. We will be raised. But, verse 23, each in turn, Christ the first fruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him.

Do you see the image again? Just as the first peach begins and guarantees a bumper harvest. So Jesus, raised from the dead, begins and guarantees the resurrection of the dead.

Your resurrection, if you belong to him. Could you see that? Could you believe this?

Could you believe that because you are a peach like Jesus, could you believe that on the day he comes, you too will be made alive?

[ 18 : 52 ] You, your body rising from the grave as his did. It's not wacky to imagine that. It's not fairy story.

It's not beyond belief. For Christ was raised and he is the first fruits of many.

Deep breath. End of the first thing, Paul says. In verses 24 to 28, Paul turns to a second argument. To persuade you of your own future resurrection.

First, Christ was raised. He's the first fruits of many. Second now, verse 24 onwards. Christ is reigning. And he will finish his death destroying work.

In verse 24 onwards, do you see? Paul looks forward to the end. He looks forward to the climax of all of human history. He looks forward to the time when the risen, reigning Jesus Christ will have finished his work.

[ 19 : 59 ] Let me read from verse 23. But each is made alive in turn. Christ, the first fruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him.

I'm looking forward to that future time now. Verse 24. Then the end will come when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

We're invited here to look forward to the end of time. And the day when Jesus Christ says to God the Father, here is the kingdom.

I've finished the destroying work you gave me to do. For verse 25. He must reign until he's put all his enemies under his feet.

What Paul has in mind here is the words of Psalm 110, verse 1. The Old Testament text most quoted in the New Testament.

[ 21 : 07 ] Which reads, The Lord said to my Lord, the Christ, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

This is God's plan for his universe. That Jesus must reign until all his enemies are under his feet.

Do you know what that image is? In a wrestling match or in a fight with your brothers or sisters. Do you know when your enemy is totally beaten? They are beaten when you can put your foot on them and they don't move.

That's when you know it's all over. That's when you know you've won. And in God's plan for his world, the risen Lord Jesus must reign until he has destroyed every power hostile to God.

Maybe it's not super clear to us in these verses who all these enemy powers are. But we do know who the last of God's enemies is. You know in James Bond or I guess in the Marvel Universe, there's often a last enemy.

[ 22 : 15 ] As you go through the film, the sidekick baddies get dealt with one by one, till right at the end there's a climactic fight with the enemy boss. Jesus must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

And verse 26 says the last enemy being destroyed is death. Death is the last enemy of God's good purposes for his world.

However much we believe in God or not, we know that, that death is an enemy. And the work of Jesus Christ, risen and ascended, is to utterly destroy death.

His work is to knock death's teeth out and to leave death lying on the floor under his feet, destroyed forever.

That is God's good plan for his creation. And Jesus Christ will finish the job. And he will do it by raising you and me from the dead.

[ 23 : 32 ] We who belong to him. That's what Paul's getting to in these verses. If you're a Christian believer, were you to die and stay dead forever, do you know what that would mean?

It would mean that death had won. It would mean that God's promise and his plan fail. It would mean that death will win.

It would mean that death will win. It would mean that the last enemy wins. Is that possible? Is it likely that death will win?

The answer is no. No way. When the Lord Jesus Christ comes in glory to judge the living and the dead, in raising you from the grave, he will be finishing his God-given work.

And that is a solid certainty. Our Lord destroying death by raising you. 4, verse 27, God has put everything under his feet.

[ 24 : 45 ] Paul wants us to know it doesn't include God himself, who put everything under Christ. But finally, verse 28, when he has done this, when Jesus Christ has finished his death-destroying work, and with all who are in Christ raised from the dead and made alive, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

On that day, God's plan will be complete, and he will reign over a new restored world. And you and I and all creation will rejoice in him.

And 1 Corinthians 15, verses 20 to 28, they are stretching verses, I think, to get our heads round. Come back to what we said at the start. I asked at the beginning, beyond death, what?

Beyond your death, after you've taken your last breath and die, what? It does seem so common sense to believe in nothing beyond the grave.

You die, you rot, that's it. How utterly desperate. It seems a touch more hopeful to think of some kind of wispy better place. But the resurrection of the dead?

[ 26 : 10 ] The skeletal remains below London? Or you and me, buried or cremated, rising? You say, surely not. Paul says, know this.

We are meant to hear this. And we're meant to believe this beyond a shadow of a doubt. Jesus Christ was raised bodily, and he's the first fruits of many.

And Jesus Christ is reigning, and he will finish his death-destroying work. And so, in Christ, all will be made alive.

But each in their turn. Christ, the first fruits. That's already happened. And then when he comes, those who belong to him. Our bodily resurrection.

Not wacky. Not unbelievable. Because Christ was raised. Because Christ is reigning. The resurrection of the dead is a total and utter certainty.

[ 27 : 15 ] It's certain. And so the final question is, do we belong to him? Will we belong to this risen, reigning, death-destroying Saviour?

Are you bound up in a bundle now with Christ? Have you turned to him and put your faith in him? Jesus, you are my Lord and my Saviour. Because if you have, then you are in Christ today.

And that means you need not fear your death. You need not obsess desperately about your health. And you need not enjoy myself now or else.

When you know that you are in Christ, you can live freely. And you can spend your life serving your God gladly. And you can do so until you fall asleep in death.

Knowing with absolute certainty that when your Saviour comes, your body will rise. And you will wake and shout for joy.

[ 28 : 28 ] And you will see the face of your God. And you will praise him forever. And he will be all in all. Christ has been raised. Christ is reigning. The resurrection of those who are in him is absolutely certain and secure.

So place your faith in him and cling on to him and live for him. And let me lead us in a prayer. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.

For as in Adam all die, in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn, Christ the firstfruits, then when he comes, those who belong to him.

Our Lord and God, we live in dying bodies in a fallen world.

Yet we have heard that your son was raised from the dead. Thank you that as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

[ 29 : 43 ] Thank you that our futures are secure, we who are in Christ. Please make us those who belong to him and trust in him.

And grow in us a certain belief in our future resurrection, we pray. For we ask in Jesus' name.  
Amen. Amen.  
Amen.