

Into the Earth

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[0 : 0 0] Let's serve our heads and pray as we stand. Our Heavenly Father, we ask now that you would teach us more about Jesus and his death, more about us and our own death as well, and that you would give to us the gift of eternal life, even as we hear you speak to us this morning.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. If you would like to follow on, you can turn in your Bibles to John chapter 12 on page 101.

April 1st is a very good day to preach. At least I'm not the only one who is going to be made a fool of today. I've done some research on this, and nobody knows where April Fool's Day comes from, but it's a lovely thought to realise that all around the world today, people are having fun at other people's expense.

I think that says a lot about us, really. Here are two little stories. The BBC, every year the BBC pulls a hoax on April Fool's Day, and in 1965, BBC TV interviewed a professor who declared that he had just created Smell-O-Vision so that you could smell through the television what was going on in the studio.

And so he cooked up some coffee and cooked up some food. They had thousands of letters from people saying that it worked for them. It's a true story. And not to be outdone, in 1996, the Taco Bell in the United States announced that they had bought the Liberty Bell and they were renaming it the Taco Liberty Bell.

[2 : 0 2] And when the White House Press Secretary, Mike McCurry, was asked about it, he said, oh yes, and we've sold the Lincoln Memorial in Washington and renamed it the Ford Lincoln Mercury Memorial.

Well, now I think the Pharisees must have felt a little bit like April Fool's in John 12. The guy they wanted to kill a few days earlier had come to Bethany, very close to Jerusalem, had raised someone from the dead.

It's very disappointing if you want to kill someone that he does that. And then he comes into Jerusalem, crowd riots, calls out to him, Hosanna, which means save us.

I must say, we've got to get that to the Sunday school then. The first answer down here was, it means something like hooray. That's not... It's not quite it.

Although hooray would be better than nothing. But what they are saying to Jesus is, save us. You can make bread out of thin air. Our leaders have done nothing with the Romans.

[3 : 0 6] Come and save us. You're the king. And as Dan pointed out to the children, at the centre of this, Jesus does this bizarre thing of choosing a donkey to ride on because he's got Zechariah in mind.

He wants to show them the kind of king he's going to be. He's going to be a gentle king. Yes, his dominion will be from sea to sea, but he comes as the king who weeps and goes to his death through the blood of the covenant.

That's the kind of king he is. And by the way, thank you for everyone who wrote me letters about riding on a donkey and the song from Quebec. I've had enough letters.

Thank you very much. It must have been massively depressing to the Pharisees. And so at the end of last week's passage, in verse 19, they come up with this kind of unintended prophecy.

They say, look, he can do nothing. The world has gone after him. And we ask, as the readers, we stand back and go, of course, Jesus has come as the saviour of the world because God so loved the world to give his life for the world.

[4 : 11] Yes, he's the saviour of the world. And we know that he is going to be lifted up on the cross and he's going to draw all people to himself through his death. But it gets worse. With the noise of the crowds ringing in our ears, as our passage starts in verse 20, we read that a group of Greeks who are in Jerusalem go and want to see Jesus.

And they find the two guys with Greek names, Philip and Andrew, who come from a Greek sort of area, Bethsaida, and they say, we want to see Jesus.

We want to have an interview with him. I mean, Pharisees are choking with rage at Jesus and saying, he's so popular, everyone in Israel seems to be going after him.

They overstate it and say, the whole world goes after him. And the very next thing that happens is the whole world does come after him. Because these Greeks represent the non-Jewish world.

They're there in the city. They're attracted to Judaism. But everything attractive about Judaism falls away before this one Jesus who raises from the dead and comes in on a donkey and the crowd hails him and wants him to save them.

[5 : 24] And the Greeks, they want to know him. And the moment's very important for Jesus. This is the turning point in the Gospel. In verse 23, Jesus answered them, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

The fact that the Greeks come now is a trigger. It's the switch for Jesus. Until now, the hour has been in the future. My hour has not yet come. But now, he says, the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

It's the climax of his ministry. He knows it is now time for him to die. His death has been what his mission has been about. It's been at the forefront of his mind throughout this chapter.

Do you remember when Mary anointed him? He said, it's about my burial. The reason he chose the donkey was a picture of what he's going to do. And now that the hour has come, what does he do?

He does not run and hide. What he does is he opens his heart and he gives to us a very simple picture. And it's a wonderful picture because it works both ways.

[6 : 31] It works for him and it works for us. He is speaking about himself and his death and he is speaking about us and our death as well.

That's what verse 24 is doing. Let me just read it to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. It is as though Jesus pushes the pause button in this middle of the chapter and he says, this is what it's about.

And in this little statement, Jesus gives us a paradox. Actually, two paradoxes for the price of one. One about him and one about us. The paradox is this.

For Jesus, firstly, the paradox is that his death means fruit. Unless a grain of seed falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

[7 : 33] But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Now, if you lived in first century Palestine, this would have been very obvious to you. If you have a grain of wheat and you put it on the table, you know what it does?

Nothing. It's useless. It just lies there. But if you take, what you've got to do to get fruit from it is you've got to have a burial service. You've got to put it in the ground.

ground. You've got to destroy it. You've got to give it over to death. Only then does it become fruitful. I am not a farmer. And so I looked this up and I discovered that the kernel, the wheat kernel, is called a karyopsis.

And it is described as a dry, indehiscent fruit. I don't know what that word means. but it says it's no good until you put it in soil and then it germinates.

It comes to life and produces fruit. Why is Jesus saying this? He is explaining his death. There's nothing pretend about his death.

[8 : 39] It means his complete physical destruction. He will die. But the fruit of his death is I think the most remarkable thing that this world has ever seen. Millions of people around the world today claim that this one who died so long ago is Lord of all and that through faith in him they have a new life.

In every continent, in every country, in this world, hundreds of millions of people say that when they placed their faith in Jesus Christ they had like a renewal and a redemption and a freedom from all sorts of slavery, from false gods, that in the death of Jesus they see the love of God which passes all understanding.

Greeks, Jews, Anglos, Asians, all around the world. We are the fruit of Jesus' death. We are the fulfilment of this verse.

And we would not be here if it were not for Jesus going into the ground and dying. Do you see? It's completely counterintuitive. The death of Jesus is an offensive thing.

It always was. It will always remain so. It's a disgraceful thing for a man to hang on the cross under the curse of God. It looks like the opposite of glory. But as he laid down his life, Jesus knew that in doing it he would bear much fruit.

[10 : 07] It was his deliberate choice. You know, death had no power over Jesus. death couldn't take his life away. He's the source of life, the eternal word, the resurrection and the life.

Death could not touch him. But he chooses to lay down his life. And if you're willing to think about it, that completely shatters any idea of a circle of life or an endless rotation on the wheel of nature.

Jesus does not go to death because he's part of a rotating wheel. He's not forced into death by nature. He doesn't live an old, die a natural death. But he deliberately chooses to give his life away.

And why does Jesus do it? Why did Jesus die? It is for the fruit. It's for us. We are the reason he gave himself to death.

That's the point of verse 24. And that is the first paradox. But there is a second paradox and it is for us. And for us, death means life.

[11 : 17] If you look at the passage, immediately after verse 24, Jesus begins applying the principle to us. Let me read those two verses, 25-26.

He who loves his life loses it. She who hates her life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he or she must follow me and where I am, there shall my servant be also.

If anyone serves me, my Father will honour them. See, there is something deeply counterintuitive about the Christian life. If we are going to take, if we are going to follow Jesus Christ, we have to take our life in this world and do with it as we do with the wheat seed.

We have to bury it. We have to kill it. We have to put it in the ground. It's what the Christian life is about. The Apostle Paul said, you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God.

And the important thing to see here is that Jesus is talking about two different attitudes to life in this world. You see, loving life in this world is acting as though this world is where real meaning, real significance happens.

[12 : 36] This world is the world of most importance. When Jesus says hating your life, he's not talking about despising and loathing God's precious gift. It is a comparison.

That's what he's doing. You see, our present life in this world is one of God's most wonderful blessings that he's given to us.

But when we discover Jesus Christ, we discover someone who is more important, wonderful and more wonderful than life itself. He's the source of life.

And if we are to receive the gift that he brings, we have to lay down our lives. We've got to die like the grain of wheat. An illustration for this.

Let me say I give you ten dollars, okay? I give you freely ten dollars. And then I come to you a little while later and say, you know that ten dollars I've given you? I'll give you a million dollars if you give it back to me.

[13 : 38] Or I'll give you a mint if you give it back to me. That is the comparison. You see, this life, the Christian view is that this life that we have here and now is brilliant, it's wonderful.

But what Christ offers us is infinitely greater. Do you remember the psalmist says, thy loving kindness is better than life? And that's the problem.

You see, the life that we have here is so wonderful and so seductive, it easily overwhelms the heavenly life in us and it consumes our dreams and it consumes and we get so busy and it swallows up our hope like weeds choking a plant of wheat.

Here is the paradox. Death means life. life. There is something very peculiar about life. There is this paradoxical thing about life in this world.

It is like waves that come up on the sand. Every time you try and grab a hold of life and hold on to life and hoard life, it slips through your fingers. Or as Jesus says here, the very act of trying to hold on to life, this life, means you will lose it.

[14 : 56] Actually, literally in verse 25, Jesus says, he or she who loves their soul is destroying it now. You know the illustration of the monkey and the peanut?

Peanut in the Ming vase, monkey comes along, wants peanut, puts hand in Ming vase, grabs hold of peanut, can't get it out because the fist is clenched, you see. So the monkey has to destroy the Ming vase to grab a hold of the peanut.

That is what Jesus is saying here. If you love your life in this world, you will destroy the real thing, you will destroy any hope of eternal life. I want to read to you now from another book which is not quite as holy, it's called Wind in the Willows.

And you know Toad is a wonderful picture of all of us. And Toad discovers boating, and then he discovers punting, and he makes a bit of a meal of it.

ratty and mole go to him and tell him, let's go boating. And Toad has moved on. He's discovered the new thing in life, and it is a riding by caravan.

[16 : 10] He says, I gave up boating a long time ago. It's a sheer waste of time. It makes me downright sorry to see you fellows who ought to know better, spending all your energies in this aimless manner. I've discovered the real thing, the only genuine occupation for a lifetime, and I propose to devote the rest of my time to it.

A few pages later, as they're driving down the road in their caravan, horse and caravan, a car comes by and knocks the caravan into a ditch, and Ratty and Mole pick themselves up and ask Toad to help them ride the caravan, but Toad, they find him in a sort of a trance, a happy smile on his face, his eyes fixed on the dusty wake of their destroyer, and at intervals he was heard to murmur, poop, poop, that's what the car said, the rat shook him by the shoulder, said are you coming to help us Toad?

Glorious, a stirring sight, he murmured, never moving, the poetry of motion, the real way to travel, the only way to travel, here today, in next week, tomorrow, villages skipped, towns and cities jumped, always somebody else's horizon, oh bliss, oh poop, poop, oh my, stop at Toad, cried Moll, and to think I never knew, he says, all those wasted years that lie behind me, I never knew, never dreamt, and now, now that I know, now that I realise what a flowery track lies spread before me henceforth, what dust clouds shall spring up behind me as I speed on my reckless way, what carts shall I fling carelessly into the ditch, in the weight of my magnificent onset, toad, toad is a west coast man really, you know the next bright and colourful and shiny thing that comes along, he wants it, Jesus says, if you really truly love your life, don't love it in this world, love it in the next, just think about it for a second, he says, what comparison is there between 80, 90 years in this life, and eternity with God, if we die with Christ, he gives us a life that is stronger than death, stronger than any life in this world, what a tragedy to miss out on eternity with Christ, by loving this life more, by saying I only live for the now, if you took all the joy and all the meaning and all the pleasure and all the contentment this world has to offer, if you lived a charmed life with people to serve you, with unlimited resources, if you could live ten of those lives, it is not worth comparing to ten minutes in God's presence in heaven, that's why in verse 26, Jesus makes this stunning promise, he says, if you follow me where I am, that's where my servant will be, and where is

Jesus? Jesus, he's risen from the dead, he is at the Father's side in glory, that's what eternal life is, eternal life is not life that just goes on and on and on and on and on, eternal life is the life, it's the heavenly life of being in fellowship and friendship with God, no decay, no evil, no corruption, eternal, glorious, fresh, springing, new, replenishing itself, and that is why when our Christian brothers and sisters die, yes we are sad but we are also glad because they are in the presence of Christ and it's as though Jesus wants to take a red pen and underline this in the last phrase of verse 26, he says, and the person who serves me, my father will honour him.

Jesus planted him, he died in the ground, he was raised and God has honoured him at the highest place and he shares his life with us and he shares his resurrection with us and he shares his glory and his honour with us.

[20 : 14] Do you know what this means? That if you follow Jesus Christ at the end of your life when you die, you and I will be welcomed into the presence of God the Father and God the Father will treat us with all the dignity and all the glory and all the honour with which he treats Jesus Christ.

We don't deserve any gifts from him but this is a gift I think that's higher than anything else I can think of. And that is why giving away this life, giving away life in this world is not a negative sort of self-denial, it's focused on Christ, in Christ, with Christ, we join him in that seed as it were.

If you're not a Christian you may be thinking what on earth would possess you to do something, I mean what possible reason could you have for giving away your life in this world? The only reason is because we found something which is better than life.

We found the one who is the creator of life, the source of life, which wells up for eternal life. I don't think Jesus wants us to get the idea from these verses that serving him is a sort of a dull and colourless and humourless, yes, yes, I'm happy to be a Christian but I've got to die every day.

We're not earning our way to heaven by a noble sacrifice, we're not following some divine Jim Jones. We are burying our lives in the one who loves us.

[21 : 49] What other God has left the comfort of heaven and given his life for us? What other religious leader weeps with us and for us and promises us all that is his by giving it over to us?

And that is why I think the flavour of this passage and the flavour of the Christian life is not woe is me, I'm so wretched. It's just amazement. That the Son of God should come and should give his life so that we might have all the things that belonged to him rightly and didn't belong to us.

So we're not sort of spiritual scrooges, miserable all the time, it's just we found something better than life. And if it looks like we hate life, actually it's because we love life.

It's the Peter question, do you remember in chapter 6, and I finish with this, Jesus has fed the 5,000 and then he begins to teach them that the true bread is his flesh for the life of the world and the crowd said this is too difficult and they go away from him.

And so Jesus turns to his disciples and says will you also leave, do you also like to leave me? And Peter says this, Lord, to whom shall we go?

[23 : 06] You have the words of eternal life. Isn't that a great question? What are the options really? Who can compare with Jesus?

To whom shall we go? And I think this is the one question that every single one of us must face. And as we come to Easter this year, Easter 2007, Jesus asks us, do you wish to serve me?

Do you wish to follow me? Do you wish to be with me? Love me above everything else. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.

But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Two paradoxes for the price of one. For Jesus it means, death means fruit. For us, death means life, eternal life, the life of heaven, which begins now in communion with Christ and continues then in face-to-face fellowship with him as the Father chooses to honour us as he honoured his Son.

This is what we are called to. I can't think of anything better. Amen.