

Free at Last

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[0 : 0 0] Our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that you would now be with us in your risen power and open our hearts so that we might have faith and hope and love, so that when you come on the last day to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to life eternal.

Through your name we pray. Amen. Please sit down. Well, I confess as we begin that I tremble as I speak to you this morning, not because of who you are, but because of the importance of the things that we're talking about.

And in a sense, every time we open God's word, we should tremble. But as we come to this day, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to the hope of glory and to the message of salvation, I think there is a special sense of privilege and inadequacy.

There's nothing that we could say to each other that is more wonderful, more life-giving, more full of hope, both for this life and for the life to come, than this, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.

There is nothing more crucial. There is nothing more relevant. There's nothing more wonderful. So what I want to do is something a little different. What we usually do at Easter time is we take one of the gospel stories, we go to the empty tomb, we see Jesus appearing to his disciples.

[1 : 3 9] But today I want you to turn in the yellow leaflet back to page 4, to Acts chapter 13, to a sermon that the Apostle Paul preached when he first got to the province of Galatia in Asia Minor.

As with all the sermons by the Apostles in the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul does not give them a vague message about love and God and spiritual stuff.

He doesn't deal with their political situation. He doesn't tell them to be kind to each other. The heart of his message and the heart of the Christian gospel is Jesus Christ, his death and his resurrection.

Because Christianity is Christ. It's not a moral system. It's not a self-help spirituality. It is Christ. And on this day when this message was preached, he speaks to people who've never heard of the resurrection before and he asks two very simple questions.

The first is, what is it? And the second, what does it do? And I want to just reread a couple of verses that David read in answer to the first question, what is the resurrection?

[2 : 5 1] From verse 28, Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in the tomb.

But God raised him from the dead. Many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. His close friends who knew who he was were now witnesses to the people.

Now why does Paul put it this way? Why the emphasis on the reality of his physical death? Why is it Paul's at such pains to point out that Jesus appeared bodily to his friends and disciples who are now witnesses to the resurrection?

I think the answer is very simple. He wants to protect us from deluding ourselves that the resurrection is some kind of myth or metaphor for endless human rebirth or potential.

the circle of life, the religious myth. He wants us to know that the resurrection is about the bodily raising of Jesus Christ from the dead, that God reached through death for the first time and brought out Jesus Christ with a new and transformed body so that the iron grip of death for the first time since creation has been broken.

[4 : 19] And it opens a door for us. I do hope you find it exasperating and wearying as I do when you open the newspapers at Easter time and read the editorials.

They seem constitutionally unable to face this fact of the resurrection. Instead, they give this predictable lie. They say Easter is about the rebirth of spring.

It's about the circle of life, birth and death and rebirth that we see in nature overlaid with a spiritual content. No, no, no. This is not the resuscitation of Jesus.

It's not a rebirth of Jesus into a reincarnated life. This is a resurrection where Jesus goes through death and out the side into a different kind of existence.

If you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it's not simply believing in life after death. It is believing that Jesus Christ has gone through with a new deathless body and that we too will receive what he gave us.

[5 : 24] I was in the pharmacy the other day and in this pharmacy they know what I do as a job and on the counter was one of these new cold medications.

Let's just call it cold F-I-X. And I asked the woman about the effectiveness and she said to me with a wave of her hand, it's just a placebo.

It only works if you think it's going to. And then she looked at me without a blink of irony and she said, then you'd know all about that because that's the same as your work, isn't it?

I think she was trying to be nice to me. I mumbled something like, that's the opposite of what I'm trying to do. See, if Christ is raised from the dead, this world is no longer the same.

Death has been broken and death can no longer hold us captive. And the Christian gospel is about something that happened in the real world.

[6 : 33] Something that deals with the deepest, most impossible, most intractable problems in our world. The resurrection is not about you and me finding some spiritual dimension to our lives.

It's about God laying claim on us, our bodies, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is very helpful.

The Soviet Encyclopedia in 1929, which I found lying in Neil's office, I was just kidding.

It says this about the resurrection. This dogma is found to be in the most decisive contradiction with scientific natural knowledge, which confesses the inescapability of death as the destruction of individuality with its physical and psychical peculiarities.

Exactly right. Don't you? And the problem with the resurrection is that it is so much God's doing, it's so much God's gift, it's not an extrapolation of our circumstances.

[7 : 42] It's not something that we could hope for from our experience. It's not some spiritual extension of our hopes and wishes or some kind of dreary utopian world created by a Hollywood writer.

It contradicts our experience. It's something entirely new. It is life in the place of death. It is glory in the place of suffering. It is righteousness in the place of sin.

It is the beginning of the new creation. And the wonderful news that we confidently proclaim to one another this morning is that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

That's what the resurrection is. But we need to move to the second question because that is where the apostle spends most of his time. If that's what it is, what does it do?

What does it achieve? And if you look down to verse 32, the apostle begins by saying that the resurrection is the fulfillment of all the purposes and all the promises of God for hundreds and for thousands of years.

[8 : 46] And then in verse 33 to 36, he quotes the Old Testament three times. Three promises from the mouth of God in the Old Testament.

And what those three quotes do is they explain the point of the resurrection. He quotes the Old Testament to give us God's view of the resurrection, God's interpretation of the event of the resurrection.

You know, of course, Christian faith is not just bare facts. It's facts plus interpretation. I mean, just a moment ago in the Creed, we said he was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

That's a historical fact. But we also said he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and that is interpretation. And these quotes are terribly important for us because without them, we would not really know what the resurrection means.

We would not know that it was God's open door for us. And I want to read to you verses 34 to 37 to see what the resurrection is all about.

[9 : 57] And I want you to notice the repeated use of the word corruption. As for the fact, verse 34, as for the fact that God raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption.

He spoke in this way, I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David. Therefore, he also says in another psalm, thou wilt not let thy holy ones see corruption.

For David, after he had served the counsel of God in his own generation, fell asleep, was laid with his fathers and saw corruption. But he whom God raised up saw no corruption.

Four times the apostle uses this magnificent and threatening biblical word. It's a very important word.

And it speaks about who we are morally, physically, spiritually. It means hollowed out, empty, dry, decaying, perishing.

[11 : 02] And everything you and I do is touched by decay and corruption. It does not matter how many times a week you exercise. It doesn't matter what diet, latest diet you happen to be on.

It doesn't matter how many creams you apply to yourself at night or how much plastic surgery you have done to yourself. Our bodies, my body, your body, are heading for corruption.

Last Wednesday night, a number of us gathered over in the hall to hear back from those who had gone to Malawi in Central Africa and they brought photos and stories. The majority of the buildings that are constructed in Malawi are made with bricks.

The bricks are made from termite hills. There's only one problem with termite hills. They last a couple of years and then they themselves start to decay.

So the buildings that have been built in the last ten years, the schools and the hospitals and the churches, they are crumbling. So in Malawi, a building is either going up or it's coming down.

[12 : 13] And I thought, that's a great picture of us, isn't it? The men who are outside working on the road are working on the road because roads decay when they're used. And as you go by them, by the way, who was it that asked them to stop working?

That's very kind of you. We should thank them and we should tell them that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead if you feel so moved to do. My point is this, that our bodies are corruptible.

You know the psalm, Paul quotes there, in the Old Testament, in that psalm, the psalm pictures death as a voracious beast.

The jaws of the grave lust after us with an insatiable appetite and the grave wants nothing more than to devour us and to consume us so that we are no more.

Very sobering to realise, isn't it? That there were some who were with us here last year who have been taken by death. But corruption is not limited to our physical bodies.

[13 : 20] Our hearts and our minds, our moral and our spiritual selves are also marked by corruption. In fact, our physical corruption is the external demonstration of the reality of our inward spiritual corruption.

Did you notice this week in the news that the people of Kyrgyzstan overthrew their government in a fury because of the corruption in the government? And as they overthrew the government, they ransacked and looted every government building and the presidential compound.

Did you know there is an international organisation called Transparency International dedicated to exposing corruption? They call themselves a coalition against corruption.

And each year they publish a report in corruption around the globe. I've read the 2005 report. It is sobering reading.

It reveals the growing signs of corruption in the South African government. It reveals the corruption in the building contracts in Iraq's reconstruction. It demonstrates the cronyism and nepotism in the European education system and the corruption and graft in the tsunami relief efforts.

[14 : 39] And each year they have a bribe payers index. they reveal the countries that have the highest propensity to bribe overseas companies and which industries are most affected from construction to arms, from banking to agriculture, from pharmacy to forestry.

Right in the middle of the report the most important indicator is called the Global Corruption Barometer. Canada. And it measures corruption in political institutions and it lists countries in five categories from least corrupt down to most corrupt.

Unless you feel too self-righteous, you know where Canada comes? It comes in the middle group alongside Albania, Croatia, Russia, Pakistan and India.

And their solution to this is to offer a corruption fighters toolkit which you can download as a PDF from the internet and teach to your children.

This week in Montreal a new play opened called Death and Taxes by Guy Sprung. It's a play about moral decay and greed in the Canadian government.

[16 : 01] Patronage, kickbacks, bid rigging. Sprung is fascinated by how our sense of what is right erodes bit by bit over time. And he gives a wonderful example of how we treat the yellow traffic light.

See, when he learnt to drive he was taught that the yellow traffic light means slow down and stop. But over time that has evolved he says and now people respond to the yellow traffic light by accelerating and then the next couple of cars go through the red light as well.

And I must say in my time here in Canada I feel when I come to a yellow light that I've got a moral choice either to be self-righteous or guilty.

But what upsets sprung so much is that nobody seems to care. This is what the apostle means by corruption. It's the ordinary daily decisions.

The Bible says we live in a wall of corruption inwardly and outwardly. We are slaves. Resurrection of Jesus Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

[17 : 14] it addresses us at our point of greatest need. This corruption which we cannot solve for ourselves we can paste over it for a little time despite our most brilliant efforts.

We cannot fix it. What the resurrection does smashes a hole in the wall and it demonstrates that corruption cannot hold Jesus Christ and it cannot hold those who belong to Jesus Christ and that's the point of verse 34.

The resurrection is not just for Jesus' sake. He rose again for us so that God will give to you the holy and sure blessings he promised to David.

It took what was incorruptible what was eternal what was imperishable his life it took the giving of that over to death to give us what was incorruptible to rescue us from the slavery to corruption as we place our faith in the risen Jesus Christ he shares his life with us and we are made anew with new desires and new hopes and we become new people because salvation comes through the forgiveness of sin because at the root of our corruption is sin separating us from God and I wonder if you feel that moral and spiritual force in your lives which the Bible calls corruption I wonder if you naturally turn to God and thank him and respond to his grace you naturally love his word and trust his promises in the death and resurrection of Jesus

God has swept aside every barrier between us and him and for those who believe in him receive the forgiveness of sins and new life please don't say well I wish I had your faith or I wish I had her faith as though that's an excuse it's not that some people have the ability to believe and others don't faith is merely reaching out and saying God I believe your promise I want to finish with this you know that scientists look at the world of corruption and they call it entropy and one of the professors of chemistry at Oxford University has written a book on the second law of thermodynamics and he says that chaos and decay are so deeply part of the structure of a reality that it is impossible for us as human beings to have any purpose whatsoever let me quote to you from him he says we are the children of chaos at root there is only corruption and the unstemmable tide of chaos gone he says is purpose this is the bleakness we have to accept as we peer deeply and dispassionately into the heart of the universe and I think he's right if you take away the resurrection of Jesus

[20 : 31] Christ from the dead we are abandoned to corruption and to chaos and it seems to me there's no real point and there's no real purpose but if Jesus Christ has been risen from the dead we are not just children of chaos and corruption we are children of God we are those with whom Jesus Christ wishes to share his new life a life in which corruption will not have the final word and by faith I am bound to him who is risen from the dead I am his and he is mine and although he knows me as I really am he loved me and gave himself for me for me to live is Christ I have been crucified with him it's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me and God's promise is that through Jesus we too will be raised with him to live with him and that one day my perishable mortal corruptible body will put on an imperishable immortal and glorious body and I will dwell with him forever and ever and ever hallelujah amen amen