

Hard to Swallow

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray as we stand. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you promised to speak to us through your word.

Pray that you would take all those things that trouble us and distract us and tempt us and put them aside so that we might hear you.

And we pray that in hearing your voice, we might trust you and so have life. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

I have wanted for some time now to speak to you about death and dying and our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And as we gather this morning, many of us are grieving the loss of Maureen Hanson, who died this last week. And she, with a number of others in this past year, were deeply and sacrificially involved in the work of the gospel here amongst us.

[1 : 13] And it just so happens that this was the series that we had been thinking about. And so for the next eight weeks, we're going to look at something of what the New Testament says, not just for our own comfort and consolation and encouragement, but because we have to learn to die before we can learn to live.

And all of us, you know, must face death. Every single one of us will leave behind every bond and every relationship which is precious to us now.

And unless we see one another in the light of heaven, we're not going to be able to properly value and appreciate each other now. This is such a central part of our faith.

Every week when we gather, we remind one another that we believe in the resurrection of the body. And I would be failing in my responsibilities as your pastor if I did not point to some of the treasures that we have in the Lord Jesus and the death-defying, death-defeating hope that we have in him.

It also strikes me that attitudes to death have shifted in our culture, even in the last 20 years. What seems to unite the attitudes in culture is an attempt to domesticate death, to pretend that there's nothing to be afraid of, take the edge off death or to put it into a certain place so that it doesn't disturb the tranquility of our otherwise wonderful lives.

[2 : 52] There are two ways that I see this these days. The first is the huge interest in popular culture in reframing death in terms of my individual rights.

The recent Terry Schiavo case highlights some of this shift in language. I'm aware of how complicated some of these issues are. And yet death has now been framed as an end-of-life choice.

So there are now 38 right-to-die organisations in 23 countries with their aim is, quote, to protect the rights of individuals to self-determination at the end of their lives.

I think at a more basic level, we are just so busy trying to domesticate death by trying to make this world and this life so good that we're going to put off thinking about dying.

You sometimes hear people speak about heaven on earth and I've noticed this is a parlance in British Columbian tourism, often when it has to do with skiing.

- [3 : 55] This world is like heaven and you sometimes hear people say that this world, this is like hell on earth, as though there could be nothing better or nothing worse than this life.
- But of course the fact is that we have 70, 80, 90 years here and then that is followed by an eternity. I want, if you would, with me today to look at something of this chapter in the book of 1 Corinthians.
- I wonder if you'd take your Bibles and open to page 167. 1 Corinthians chapter 15, written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Corinth.
- It's the biggest chapter in the letter and the whole chapter is devoted to the results of Jesus' death and resurrection for all who have placed their faith in him.
- There is an influential group in the congregation at Corinth who have decided there is no such thing as the resurrection of the body. It's much easier to believe in the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul.
- [5 : 08] And it's interesting to me that I think that is still the most popular view of death. It certainly was when I was growing up and watching television. In the Bugs Bunny show, when you die, your soul escapes the prison of the body and floats up to heaven.
- And the Apostle writes here, as the rest of the Bible teaches, that that is not just inadequate, that is false. And in the passage, he says that for those who trust in Christ, there are three things to understand about death.
- The first is that death is a change in bodies. Look down at verse 37, please. Using a gardening analogy, what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or some other grain.
- But God gives it a body as he has chosen and to each kind of seed its own body. Verse 42, so it is with the resurrection of the dead.
- What is sown is perishable. What is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour. It is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness.
- [6 : 22] It is raised in power. It is sown a physical body. It is raised a spiritual, supernatural body. If there is a physical body, there is a spiritual body.
- Now this is very simple, really. In this world, in this life, our bodies are weak, decaying, perishable, running down.
- And I don't need to give you illustrations of this, do I? We get injured and we never fully recover. We grow lumpy and gravity is not helping us.
- Plastic surgery can only do so much, but in the end our bodies fail and they become sickly and succumb to death. And what this passage is saying to us is that when Christ comes again, he will clothe us with bodies that are imperishable, immortal, beautiful, glorious, spiritual.
- When he uses the word spiritual, he doesn't mean that the bodies are made of spirit like a ghost, but that they are dominated and controlled by spirit just as Jesus' resurrection body was.
- [7 : 41] It's not that our souls are released from this body to float away on the clouds. It is that this body cannot bear the glory of heaven. That's the point of verse 50.
- I tell you this, brethren, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.
- You see, these bodies that you and I are, they cannot bear the weight of glory that is heaven. They cannot cope with the wonder of living face to face in fellowship with God.
- They have no power over decay and no power over death. We do not have immortality within us. We're not naturally immortal.

Our bodies belong to this world and are passing away. But here is the clear promise of God that he will clothe us with a body that is imperishable, immortal, without decay, without death.

[8 : 50] And yet it is even more than that. This is very important and this is the most complicated thing I'm going to say. It's not just that decay and death stop.

In the new resurrection body, those things are actually reversed. The spiritual bodies are not just endlessly, endlessly, endless. You don't just go on and on and on.

But they have a life which is growing and expanding and deepening and flourishing because the life of heaven and the life of the kingdom of God is the opposite of this life with all its futility and frustration and fruitlessness.

That life in the new body is a life of purpose and beauty and glory. And I wish I could find an illustration for it but I don't think you can illustrate it. It is beyond human imagination.

Paul says that there's two humanities. There's one that looks back to Adam as its original parent and Adam's body came from the ground and is dust and will die.

[9 : 54] And he says there's another humanity that comes from Jesus and his resurrection body came from heaven and it is full of life, immortality and resurrection power. That is why the New Testament keeps encouraging us to sit lightly to this world because our true home is not here.

It is elsewhere. Yes, we live 60 to 100 years here perhaps but in 100,000 years, in 100 million years we will be with Christ.

Let me put it this way, our little lives here are followed by a big life there. Not just in duration, not just endless extension of this life but in a different kind of life in fellowship with God, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, with one another, knowing as we are known, outwardly and inwardly free from sin, free from fear, free from failure, free from death.

And all of this comes through Jesus Christ. When he comes again will change and transform our bodies and put on us these glorious new bodies.

It's good news. So every man and every woman and every child who has placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, death means a change of bodies.

[11 : 28] That's the first point. The second is this. Death is an enemy. I do not want to be misunderstood. The New Testament never gives a rosy picture of death.

Just cast your eyes down to verse 26 for a moment please. You see, the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Death is an enemy.

It's not just our enemy, it's God's enemy. It's not a friend. It mocks every human achievement. It interrupts. It separates us from our loved ones.

It enslaves us with fear. And it's the last enemy which God will destroy and so it deeply troubles us now. That's why I think to be angry in the face of death is not a loss of faith.

I think both Christians and non-Christians feel this anger and I think there's something profoundly right about it. Dylan Thomas in his famous poem who's angry at his father's growing blindness and moving towards death says, do not go gentle into that good night.

[12 : 43] Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the night. sin. And I think there's something profoundly right about that sentiment but you can never understand it unless you believe in sin.

You look down at verse 56. The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. The Bible's view is that sin is like a poison which has been introduced to humanity and the result of sin is death.

Death has come into the world through sin. When God created Adam and Eve to be his image, he placed them in the garden. He said, you can eat of every tree except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. And when Adam and Eve choose to disobey God, they personally revolt against the one who is the source of life.

They turn their back and they walk away from him as we do with every sin and through their sin they introduced the terrible reality of death into our world and now every child of Adam is born to die.

[14 : 02] I need to say again that the Bible teaches that death is the penalty for sin. It is the result of our rebellion. It's not normal.

It's not just the next stage of life. It's not just the result of the natural process of decay. It is an obscenity and it comes from being separated from God.

Just let me qualify that does not mean that if you are very sinful you will die young. Just that your sin and my sin demonstrate that we are caught up in Adam's image and we gladly follow his disobedience.

We think almost nothing sinning against God. Nor does it mean that if you live to 105 it's because you are a particularly righteous and godly person. It's not a direct one-to-one correlation like that.

I was ordained in 1986 and I was sent to a parish in Sydney where all the clergy on staff had just left.

[15 : 11] It was not a very loving thing to do to a young curate nor to a congregation at the time. However, in my second week I received a phone call from a local doctor who said to me that there was one of his patients who was dying of cancer and he felt that it might be useful to her if a minister visited her.

I remember visiting her the first time. She was 42. She had come back to die from Canada actually and we sat out on the deck looking up the northern beaches.

It was a beautiful day and the sunlight was glinting off the water and she was terrified of dying. And I didn't know what to do really. I didn't know what to say to her.

And so we began at the beginning and we looked at what the Bible says about death and dying. She had had her fill of positive new age thinking and teaching and she said it doesn't work.

And over a period of weeks she was greatly relieved that God's word was so plain and truthful about death that the sting of death is sin.

[16 : 23] And she was even more overjoyed as she discovered that Christ had died in her place to pull the sting of death and had risen again to give her life.

death. When I was at university I read Plato's dialogues. At the end of Plato's Republic he has a section where he articulates his view of death.

It's called the myth of Ur. It's a complete Pollyanna job. It's a cheerful optimistic view of death as the soul is gently released from the body and floats off.

And I want to say to you it is an empty illusion. It's Plato's attempt to pull the sting of death by his own guesswork. And if you want to see what the face of death looks like we go to the garden not the garden of Eden but to the garden of Gethsemane.

And there Jesus faces death in all its cruel God forsakenness knowing that he is going to face the wrath of God for us. And as he dies the Bible teaches he dies for us and he pulls the sting of death into himself.

[17 : 36] So the death is like a snake with poisonous fangs and the fangs they can have the poison drawn out of them. And all of us who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we will still be bitten by the snake and it will hurt but it will not be fatal because death is powerless against all those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So if you are a believer death means a change of bodies and secondly death is an enemy and thirdly and finally death is temporary.

Look down at verse 54 and death. 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 thy victory? O death where is thy sting? it's difficult to capture just how stunning this is it's saying that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ it's not just that he's made a way for you and me to live with him in glory but he's made a way so that one day he will absolutely and entirely and utterly abolish death itself when the final trumpet sounds and the day of judgment arrives and when Jesus comes to judge the living and the dead one of the things that he is going to do is to eradicate death forever since that day in the past when Jesus rose from the dead death has been put on notice it is only a matter of time until death itself is destroyed and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has begun destroying death it's amazing I mean the grave is pictured in the Old Testament as a voracious beast with these jaws that wants nothing better than to avow us and to swallow us down it lusts after us with this hunger and here we are told that when the man comes from heaven the one who died to take the sting of death who rose to show that death couldn't hold him he will take death and he will swallow it whole in one gulp the serpent will be demolished by Christ never to terrorise anyone ever again and so in verse 55 the apostle hurls these questions at death he says okay death since Christ has died for me where is your sting since Christ has taken the sting for me can you sting me anymore since Christ has risen for me where is your victory it's amazing

I mean he is taunting death he's mocking death he's saying come on death bring it on it's bold isn't it I mean this is not the kind of language you usually hear from Christians we are a very safe lot and I think we need to learn to use this language of taunting death it happens in the Old Testament it happens in the New Testament and it happens in Christian writings throughout history there's a lovely poem by John Donne one of his sonnets let me just read you a little bit he says death be not proud though some have called thee mighty and dreadful thou art not so for thou whom thou thinkest thou dost overthrow die not poor death nor yet canst thou kill me and he finishes by saying one short sleep past we wake eternally death shall be no more and then he turns and he says death thou shalt die for the person who trusts in Jesus Christ death is a new body it's an enemy and it's temporary and I want to give you two words to finish which the Apostle gives us at the end of the passage they are don't fear and don't fade verse 57 don't fear thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ it's lovely you know it's in the present tense thanks be to God who is now ongoingly giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ and I think we need to bring our thankfulness to bear on our fears we don't understand the tiniest fraction of the blessings of heaven and yet the Apostle says that we can be confident through Jesus Christ what better thing can we say to one another than this gospel by which we are saved what more could God do for us than he has done in sending his son to die and rise what more could God promise us than face to face friendship with him and with one another forever in new bodies which are imperishable eternal glorious holy and I think we need hearts of stone not to turn our thanks to God don't fear secondly don't fade verse 58 perhaps we should read this together because this really is the conclusion of Paul's argument therefore my beloved brethren be steadfast immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain this is the direct result of the resurrection it means we give ourselves to the work of the gospel because it has absolute and ultimate and eternal significance

[24 : 04] Paul says whatever you do don't let go of this gospel goodness he says if you let go of this gospel you will let go of your hope but in the face of your death and my death and in the face of the coming resurrection of Jesus Christ Paul urges all of us to be actively involved in the work of Jesus Christ the labour of the gospel all the work that is specifically directed towards God with believers and with unbelievers and I'm not sure I'm allowed to say this but I do want to say how enormously proud I am of you as a congregation in the last week during the Rico Tice mission and I want to say to you that that labour was not in vain it has already and will continue to bear fruit for eternity and everything that we do for him is not wasted because it goes before us into eternity and then if we go first it comes after us into eternity and Paul says it will please the Lord Jesus Christ if we abound in this work if we give ourselves to it extravagantly and excessively and generously we'll see you and Aurora and that