

The Mystery Of Death Exposed

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[0 : 0 0] Our God, we're all locked in the small circle of the span of our own minds. As we turn from that small circle to your word, we ask that the small circle of our minds may be enormously expanded as we, through the scriptures, encounter the mind of Christ.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Now, that passage which I want to talk to you about this morning is in the 15th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and is found on page 167, the New Testament section.

In the back of your Bible, on page 167. And the subject of the passage is death.

And on this lovely May morning, when the prospect of the sun coming out this afternoon is in front of all of us, it may seem to you to be a very sad and unhappy subject to turn to it.

But one of the miracles of grace is that when you look in the most difficult places in your life, you find the most abundant light. And therefore, I expect you, despite the subject, to go from here rejoicing in what God has seen fit to show us in his word.

[1 : 5 0] Now, when you read the passage, you will see that the first thing it deals with is a mystery.

Behold, I show you a mystery. Now, this is a mystery, one of the commentators says, and I found this very helpful.

It's a mystery not because it offers so little to our understanding, but because its superabundance overwhelms our understanding.

In other words, it's not we bringing our great minds to bear on what we consider very inadequate evidence indeed. It's rather that the evidence is so overwhelming that our little minds aren't able to comprehend it.

And so Paul says, I have been shown this mystery, and I'm going to show it to you. Now, you've got to remember that when he says that, it means this, in part, that you don't need to know this.

[3 : 0 0] Your death and what follows is not your problem. You don't have to do anything about that. That's in somebody else's hands. But because of the nature of our curious humanity, Paul sees that it was better, and the Lord saw that it was better, that we should have some understanding of it.

And so he revealed this mystery to Paul, and Paul reveals it to us in this passage. But, as I tell you, it will blow your mind.

Well, the other reason that I think Paul reveals this mystery, behold, I show you a mystery, is because the subject of death is so shrouded in superstition and avoidance and fear and morbid curiosity, horror films and all sorts of things that arouse our morbid interest and that we become fascinated and horrified by it at the same time.

And so it is the purpose of Paul to cut through all that and say, put that aside for a minute. Now, let me talk to you about the subject of death, the mystery that surrounds death.

Now, you know that one of the great, I think he was a Hollywood comedian of some kind, said, which I found his saying very helpful and puts into perspective.

[4 : 40] He said, I know that everybody ultimately will die. It's just that I didn't think it would happen to me. Well, it will.

Well, and as I see life, you know, I mean, I don't like to insult you, but sometimes I come to church feeling really bad.

But I'm always encouraged to look out at you, because so often you look worse. And so I'm encouraged to think that maybe there's some hope here.

The difference, I think, is this. And there comes a point in most people's lives when the uninformed exuberance of life that can't even contemplate the possibility of death is suddenly stopped, and in a moment of cold sobriety faces the fact of the inevitability of death.

And that has a profoundly sobering and saddening effect on us. And I think we reflect it in our faces sometimes. We show it.

[6 : 08] We show that fear has taken hold of us. And that fear is something we can't understand. And it's to cut through that kind of morbid fear and wasted anxiety that Paul sees fit to tell us what death is all about.

And this is how he does it. He says it's going to be marked first by change.

And if you look at the passage beginning at verse 50, you'll see, I tell you this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

Now, what that means, he says, he then goes on to say, neither can the perishable inherit the imperishable. Now, most of us can, at moments of great enlightenment, move from the possibility that this life, right here, right now, the throbbing reality of life in a human body with strength and vigor and enjoyment and pleasure and all good sensations and the sparkling eye and the glowing cheek and the fullness of life that somehow that should be continued on ad infinitum.

But Paul says, no, it's not flesh and blood throbbing with life, though it may be. That can't inherit the kingdom any more than that dead and decaying corpse can inherit the kingdom.

[8 : 00] Both of them have to be subjected to a radical change. Now, most of our doubts come from the fact that we contemplate physical death and are stopped from contemplating anything beyond it.

But Paul says, you can contemplate life in its most vital form, if you want, and it's marked by death in exactly the same way and both have to change.

And that's why Paul says, we shall all be changed, whether we are vibrant and alive with life or whether we are in decay and corruption and perishing in death.

The change is necessary. And so he says, what the change is, it's a change from mortal to immortal. It's a change from corrupt to incorruptible.

It's a change from perishable to imperishable. It's a change from death to life. And so he says, that change has to take place.

[9 : 20] The mystery concerns a change that has to take place. And Paul says, that change will take place at a moment in time.

Perhaps the end moment in time. He calls it the twinkling of an eye. It'll happen. This is the mystery that he's revealing to us.

That this is how God is going to do it. We're going to come to that moment in time and we shall be changed. When he talks about that moment in time, he says, that moment in time will be marked by a trumpet call.

You know, all the great sort of Jewish festivals in the temple in Jerusalem were marked by the sound of a trumpet. And so Paul sees this last moment in time being marked by a trumpet.

The trumpet shall finally sound in that moment and we shall all be changed. The dead will be raised imperishable and the living will be changed, he says.

[10 : 36] He said this is necessary because it fulfills a certain saying that is found in scripture.

He goes back to the prophet Hosea and he goes back to the prophet Isaiah and he said, when this moment of change comes, then the victory which has been established by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, that victory will be seen by all of history.

Now I like the little scramble that we're in over fusion at the moment, you know, that somebody in their kitchen set up a little experiment with a jam jar and some electrical wires and things and produced nuclear fusion.

and the whole scientific community is on its ear as to whether this really happened or whether it didn't really happen. And all sorts of money is being invested, all sorts of money is being spent and if these guys did it the way they said they did it, then there would be a lot of red faces of people who overlooked something that they should have known.

But that's the problem of the scientific community, but it's an interesting parallel because you see what Paul is saying here is that what Christ did on the cross is a little incident somewhere in time and space, somewhere back across the years in history, this event took place.

[12 : 29] And if in fact what is said happened actually happened, then the world is a different place because we then live in a world in which the death of death has occurred.

The limitations of death have been laid down. You can go thus far and no further. and Paul says that's what happened.

And he said that it happened there means not just that a peculiar and paradoxical event happened some centuries ago, but an event which has implications for the whole of history and for all people on earth, that death has been defeated.

defeated. And so he talks about that this moment comes and in that moment it will be made evident that death has been defeated and a victory has been won.

Well, what is the victory? Well, the victory, Paul says, is that death is swallowed. It's gone. You can see it no more. It's been sucked in and it's disappeared.

[13 : 53] the power and tyranny and fear and subjection to this great tyrant. That's over and death is no longer in control and we no longer live under the tyranny of this dictator death who determines the circumstances of our earthly life.

We no longer are in subjection to that tyranny because death has been swallowed up by a victory. And then Paul goes on to explain it's like this and he almost mocks death by saying death I thought it was you that was going to win the victory.

What happened? What went wrong? Then he says death where is your sting? If you want you can imagine a cobra you know sort of dancing before you ready to touch you with its fearful fatal sting.

The call says to the cobra which still may inspire fear cobra you've lost your fangs you've lost your sting you haven't got any power.

You're a toothless fraud. Death where is your sting? Paul then records what happened in history.

[15 : 29] He says historically there was a sting and the sting was sin and the reality of sin was that it was something that touched man and corrupted him and made him subject to the process of death and the tyranny of death but that sting has been taken away and the power of sin which was the law has been broken and death no longer has power.

Death no longer has its victory. Its strength is gone Paul says. well then he goes on and he says one more thing.

He talks about mystery about change about the moment which will come about the victory which will be won and then he talks about vanity and you see one of the great philosophers of the world looked at the whole realm of human life.

He looked at youth he looked at beauty he looked at strength he looked at art he looked at music he looked at sensual enjoyment he looked at labor he looked at wealth he looked at every aspect of human life and he came to one conclusion which he has recorded for us in the book of Ecclesiastes and that conclusion is vanity of vanities it's all vanity it's empty it's meaningless ultimately why is it meaningless because man like a dog dies in a ditch and death is the ultimate victor and that's what he concluded about life was that it was vain but Paul came to a very different conclusion he said life is not in vain because Christ has been raised from the dead and won a victory over death and life consists in entering into that victory now as

Christians there are several ways that we enter into that victory three I'm going to talk about one is that baptism is entering into that victory baptism is when you come and you say I wish to die with Jesus Christ in order that I may live with Jesus Christ I wish to die to this life in order that I may live in terms of the risen life of Jesus Christ and so our whole sacrament of baptism is the individual appropriation of the reality of the resurrection so when you are bringing your children to be baptized or coming yourself to be baptized you are coming to die in order that you may live second thing that relates to this is when we when we talk about and it's closely related when we talk about being born again being born again is not a kind of spiritual flutter or moment of enlightenment it's not some moral change so that from now on you're always good being born again means that you die to death and you come alive to life when you are born into the world you are subject to death when you are born again you die to death and you are alive to the life which is demonstrated by the resurrection of Jesus

[19 : 30] Christ so if somebody comes along and asks you are you born again that's what he should be asking you the third thing that's important about death and resurrection is something that appears in Colossians chapter 3 verse 5 when it talks about how we should live as Christians he said what you've got to recognize is that there is in your life that which belongs to death and there's no good trying to sustain the life in that which belongs to death put it to death be done with it finished with it don't try and keep the life going in it put it to death because you want to live the life which is shared with you by Christ through his resurrection and that's what Paul means when he writes to the Colossians in chapter 3 and verse 5 and says put to death what is earthly corruptible perishing mortal fornication impurity passion evil desire covetousness which is idolatry on account of these the wrath of God is coming in these you once walked when you lived in them but now put them all away anger wrath malice slander foul talk out of your mouth don't lie put off the old nature and its practices the things that are subject to death put on the new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator put on as God's chosen ones and that's what what he means is that this body which is subject to death and all that in a sense has got to be taken like an old suit of clothes and put on what you put on is the new life in

Christ that's what counts that's why Paul says in concluding this 15th chapter of Corinthians he says therefore my beloved let this mark your life this is the great underlying battle this is the ultimate issue so Paul says be steadfast be immovable always abounding in the work of the Lord because you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord you're not to live a life of vanity now ah there's so many things that come out of this so many applications I would like to make but I won't but I hope you will there is the mystery which Paul reveals of the last moment when all shall be changed there is the victory which Christ has won which he has won for all there is the vanity which marks our life which has come to an end and then there is this exhortation that your life is to be lived steadfastly immovably abounding in the work of the

Lord because only there is it true that your labor is not in vain the labor of life and love is not in vain in the Lord Amen anymore men but of I have been