

Pauls Last Days

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn to 2 Timothy and chapter 1, the second passage we read, and we'll take up the reading at verse 12.

I want us to focus our attention on these famous words, these last words, or rather amongst the last words of Paul in verse 12, which is, Why I suffer as I do, but I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.

I know whom I have believed. Some of you will probably know that earlier today there was a wedding.

Two people got married in a large country house down south. The woman is a celebrity known by everyone.

Her name is Jade Goody. She became famous when she appeared for the first time in the reality TV show Big Brother, and then after a while of apparent absence, she became famous again when she appeared once again on Celebrity Big Brother, this time more controversially.

[1 : 5 0] The wedding by itself, I guess, would have attracted some attention. Not much, but some. But today, it is headline news.

You can't escape it. That is because some months ago, Jade Goody was diagnosed with terminal cancer. And today, she has less than two months to live.

The fact that her life, or what remains of her life, is being exposed is, of course, controversial. There's a lot of skepticism about the amount of money which is being made and the amount being paid by celebrity TV stations and magazines for the rights to her wedding.

But somehow, for once, I don't think money really matters that much, does it? And I'm quite sure that given the choice of living and making a lot of money at this moment in time, she would choose her life.

That's the one thing neither she or anyone else has any control over. There are also those who think it's a totally distasteful and obscene thing to publicize anyone who's in the process of dying.

[3 : 2 3] I read a very fascinating article on Friday in the Times by Carol Midgley, one of the contributors to the Times. And she tells that she was in a queue in a newspaper shop and a young girl was trying to read a magazine that had a feature on Jade Goody.

And the girl's mother grabbed her and she said, don't read that. That's too awful. And then Carol Midgley goes on to say, why are we obsessed with the idea of death being private?

It's the one certainty we all have. And yet we live in prissy, botox denial of it. She further goes on to say, we like the dying to have the good manners, to stay out of sight, so that we can continue in our delusions of immortality.

Isn't that perceptive? The truth is that for the time being, she has put death in front of all of us.

And in my opinion, that's no bad thing. The church has always been accused of being obsessed with death and dying.

[4 : 41] But it looks like right now for today, for the moment in any case, it's the celebrity world that is giving death the attention that the church normally gives it.

The fear has been exposed. The devastation. The weakness. The ugliness and horror of her condition. These things have been made brutally real for us because they are real.

They are part and parcel of the world that we live in. And it might be one thing that we all need to see every so often.

Someone who is really and truly facing up to the awful reality of death. This is not a pretense anymore.

This truly is reality TV. For Jade Goody, her priorities were marrying her fiancé and trying to leave money to support her sons.

[5 : 56] You can't blame her for either of these. In the face of death, the trivialities disappear, don't they? And the really important things rise to the surface.

In fact, they become the only things left. For once, my colleague David Meredith once famously said, I would rather watch paint dry than watch Big Brother.

I have to agree with them. Not everyone would agree, but I would have to say that. And yet for once, it may do us all good to look at the reality of someone who's facing death.

But more than that, we have to ask tonight, we're not just here tonight, not even to share with someone in the uncertainty and the sadness of facing the end of their life.

We are here tonight to ask the most profound and fundamental question of all, the question that cries out to be answered, and that is this, is there a way, is there any way in this world in which someone can be prepared for that moment?

[7 : 12] Not if it happens to them, but when it happens. It's going to happen one way or the other. We may know about it and we may not know about it. It could come on us just like a thief in the night and all of a sudden and we may not know anything until we're taken in a moment from here to eternity.

Or we may, like Jade Goody, be given some kind of diagnosis. Many of the people that we know, they have to face the same thing.

And what we say about her, we say about everyone. And we're all ultimately in the same position. We're in the same condition. We are all dying, men and women, even the youngest here this evening.

You don't think much about it. Of course you don't. I didn't when I was your age either. And yet, it's a fact, isn't it? Jade Goody's only 27. She's not 70 or 80. She's 27.

People who talk about being too young to die are talking nonsense. There's no such thing as being too young to die. My question tonight is this, as a minister, as a Christian, as we gather round to hear the Bible and what God has to say to us, is there any way of being prepared for that moment which is going to come to us all?

[8 : 23] And reading the Bible, the answer has to be a loud and resounding and clear and unmistakable yes. There is a way in which, by the grace of God, our lives can be transformed to the point where we are able to meet death face to face.

I'm not saying that for anyone it is ever easy. I don't believe it's ever easy for anyone, even the strongest, most experienced Christian. There must be moments in that person's thoughts as they face death when they're weakened by the prospect of leaving a world that they know and the people that they love.

That's the way I would be anyway. I don't know how I would be. I don't know how I would face that moment. None of us do until it happens. And yet, we have to go to the Bible and ask this all-important question, is there any way in which we can be prepared for this?

The answer is yes. And because we come to the Bible, the answer is here in this book that we've taken to church with us and in this chapter. Why is this chapter so important for what we're talking about this evening?

Because these are the last words of the Apostle Paul. He was in prison in Rome. He was twice in prison in Rome. The first time was a dream compared to the second time.

[9 : 45] The first time he was able to rent his own house and he was given a huge measure of freedom to do and come and go as he wanted to. The second time which happened some years later, it was a different situation altogether.

Now he was in a dark and dingy and cold and damp and rat-infested prison and what's more, he knew that he was at the end of his life and it was with this in mind that he wrote to Timothy to encourage him and I can't think of a greater source of encouragement for any young man or anybody at all than to go to a person who's dying and to ask how is it with you?

What's on your mind? What are your thoughts as you face this certain prospect of leaving this world and saying goodbye to everything that you know and you love in this world?

How are you being prepared for that? Well, here is what Paul says. In another place he contemplates the same thing in Philippians chapter 1. He says this, For me to live is Christ he says and to die is gain.

Aren't these the most extraordinary words? Wouldn't you love to be able to say these words from your heart? For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

[11 : 11] And sometime later this is what he wrote in 2 Timothy and verse 12 he says, I am not ashamed for and here is what he tells us why he is not ashamed I know whom I have believed.

What do these words mean? How can these words be our words? How can our lives be changed so that we are able to say those words with absolute confidence?

There is no shakiness in them at all. They are absolutely assured and he is able to look at his prospect square in the face. The first thing I want us to you have to notice about the apostle Paul is that Paul knew what death was and he knew why death was in existence in the first place.

He was able to go all the way back in Romans chapter 5 for example and he was able to explain why it was that as an alien condition death had entered into the world way back at the very beginning when Adam and Eve rebelled against God and he puts it this way he says that when in Adam's sin death came into the world sin came into the world like an invading flood and death followed as the wages of sin that's the way he puts it elsewhere the wages of sin now there's no point in thinking that anyone is exempt every single one of us is in the same position because we are sinners because we are fallen people because we are corrupted and polluted by sin we've been separated from God and there's a brokenness between this world and everyone who lives in this world and God himself and death is the wages of sin but Paul knows something else he knows that death is not the end

God is not finished with you when you die it doesn't matter who you are because you have been made in the image of God and because you are a unique individual person whom God knows intimately better than you know yourself God is not finished with you when you die I know that that's the most terrifying thought that you could ever think tonight but that's the reality of it this is the reality and that's what we're afraid of I think more than anything else about death and that's why so many people try and make up their own agenda when it comes to dying you get people who believe that when you die you kind of float around in the atmosphere somewhere other people believe you become a star other people believe that somehow or other you're still able to communicate with your loved ones there's this wishful thinking that tries to that cannot let go and cannot face the reality of death there's other people who think it's all gone finished life is meaningless anyway there is no God everything that we know and value in this world well there's no ultimate value to it anyway so when you're gone you're gone there's nothing left and try as you might to escape the horror of what is in front of you you can't do it you come back to the Bible because it's only by coming back to the Bible and by facing the awfulness of what is in front of each one of us that we discover the greatness of what Jesus has done to transform that and to give us the confidence that the apostle Paul has there's no way out of it the world tries to run away from it the world tries to invent its own alternatives and it's only an invention you read a variety of inventions it's like in a postmodern world what you what you hope for or what you wish is what's real to you that's what we mean by a postmodern world what's real to you it becomes real and there are millions of people tonight and that is what keeps them going it's not because it is real it's because they want it to be real and because they want it to be real it is real for them and they say it doesn't matter anyway because there is no truth there is no reality it doesn't matter when the Bible comes to us and tells us you're wrong because there is reality and the reality begins with God if you want real reality tonight let's face it let's face the fact at the very beginning that

[15 : 49] God is and the reason why people don't want to believe that is not because they find it difficult to believe in God it's because they know the implication of their being a God is that we are accountable to him and he is our judge and that's where the problem lies because being accountable to him we know that one day we will have to give an account for all the way for the way in which we've lived our lives in all the selfish self-centered proud unclean way in which we've lived our lives that God who sees every single thought that exists within our hearts that's what God he wouldn't be God if he didn't know every single thing that's why we sang that psalm because it gives us such such painful detail into how God has searched us and known us and he knew us from the very beginning from when we were conceived in our wombs you see there's a that's got two sides to it on the one hand we find it uncomfortable that God knows everything but on the other hand it's the greatest news in the world because it tells us that we are individuals with our own significance in this world if you take God out of the picture you go down the atheist road

I've said this so many times but we're living in an atheistic world we have to have an answer take God out of the picture what are you left with you're left with nothing except we are blobs that is it and it doesn't matter how hard or how cleverly you argue with that that's the reality of it there's no God we have no significance we are just a blob of flesh and blood that's come together through time and chance and there's no such thing as value and you know what there's no such thing as you nothing you're not an individual at all you're just chemicals that's it nothing more than that but if there is a God then you're a person and we are people we're individual people we have meaning we have significance in this world if there was no God believe me I wouldn't be asking this question I wouldn't be longing for the answer I wouldn't be thinking in these terms it's because there is a God that God has given me the capacity to think and to long and to research and to ask and to reason in my mind have you not worked that out let's face reality and let's stop trying to escape it stop trying to feel good in this world stop trying to take the alternatives out let's face the reality of why we're here and who we are and our accountability to

God that's the problem isn't it because we have to stand before God is our judge and the apostle Paul knew that he knew that for most of his life he knew that since he was since he was a very a very young person I believe because he was he grew up I'm quite sure trying to be right with God we know that from his own testimony and yet and he lived a very very even even trying as he might to live the most perfect life that he could possibly live he tells us that that's what he tries to do and many people are like him they try to be exemplary because they think that that's how they're going to win points with God that's what Paul was a Saul of Tarsus the person he was before he was converted trying to win points with God is that what you're trying to do this evening that's the second alternative the people if they can't get away from the notion that there's a God you know what they try to do they try to make sure that they live their lives in such a way that's going to be deserving of God it's going to win points with God you know when you go to Tesco the first thing they ask you at the checkout you know what it is have you got a reward card what they call it a points card can't remember the name you know what that is it's a little card where you as long as you go to

Tesco all the time you buy you buy you build up points and you get rewards I don't know what the rewards are I've never collected enough points I don't even not even worth me getting a card but the whole point is that that that people do that in order for them to build up to build up an account of all the good things they've done by buying things for Tesco so Tesco reward same same with any shop same with same with American Express I have an American Express card because I used to collect air miles on American Express now they've decided to do away with air miles but that's the whole point of having one so if you use the Express card then you collect it it's the same there's schemes like that all over the world that's how people like to do God that's how they like to try and win favor with God because they think that these little things that they do for God every time and they think that God's going to take an account of all the little wee acts of kindness that they do all the times you come to church all the things you do right all the times that you resist temptation and don't use bad language and don't drink too much and all the things that you do that's what people do and religion makes it even worse because religion encourages people along that way they say the kind of it encourages people to do their best and God at the end of the day of course he's going to accept you the problem is one massive one and that is this that as long as as well as all the little tiny wee good things that we do what about the massive awful ugly sinful shameful things that we've done what's going to happen about them and you know as well as I do when it comes to the scales the balance when I measure my good things what they're worth they're not worth a scrap against the bad stuff there is no balance and Paul knew that and he spent his life trying to please

God by doing that until the day when he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and let me tell you this that is the one hope and confidence that he has as he is facing this moment of certain death in this verse I know look at what he says I know whom I have believed so he said you notice that word whom later on he puts it this way I'm convinced that he is able in other words when you ask Paul in his prison cell Paul you're going to die he says I know I'm going to die he said how can you be so confident about meeting meeting your maker and standing before God and this is his answer I know whom I have believed the whom is the key the he is the key the key that made the that they made the fundamental difference in his life on that day that he that he met with Jesus on the road to Damascus and he discovered three things about this Jesus he discovered first of all that

[23 : 00] Jesus was risen just give me five minutes to explain these three things first of all he he discovered that Jesus was risen he's discovered secondly that Jesus had died and he discovered thirdly that Jesus was God now you'd expect me to put these in the reverse order Jesus was God Jesus had died and Jesus was risen but I want to put them tonight in the order in which Paul discovered them because that is the order in which Paul discovered them he first and foremost on the road to Damascus as he made his way determined to stamp out this new group of believers who are following Jesus hating this man Jesus he discovered that he his life was brought to a complete standstill because there and then in the light that shone in front of him he discovered that Jesus was alive how did he discover that because he asked the question who are you quite a natural question to ask especially as you've just been struck as you've just been paralyzed by this light who are you and that was the question that was the all important one that was to mean a complete change in his life and the answer was this I am Jesus and I can imagine what Paul's first instinctive thoughts would have been you can't be Jesus because Jesus is dead

Saul of Tarsus believed with all his heart that Jesus of Nazareth was dead and the reports of him being alive again having risen from the dead he dismissed them he completely dismissed them but now you can't escape what's staring you in the face it doesn't matter you can have all the answers in the world isn't that right you can have all the reasonable rational intelligent answers in the world but when it comes to someone staring you in the face you can't deny it the disciples had the same problem as they tried to wrestle with the resurrection the last thing that some of them expected was to see Jesus risen from the dead and when the reports came to them from some of the women that they had seen Jesus they dismissed them completely until he stood in front of them you can't deny what stares you right in the face and I want to tell you this that the resurrection stares us all in the face it is the stark reality of the gospel if you've never thought about this before here's your starting point how can you explain that this Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified publicly and pronounced dead and buried for three days wrapped in linen how can he rise from the dead and with all his strength and power go amongst the disciples and be up and appear amongst them that is the most challenging question if you ask that answer that question you're on the road can I tell you something when somebody asks you why are you a Christian what is it that makes you a Christian I hope that you don't start talking about your wee experiences here and there your wee feelings here and there we've all got them I know how precious they are that's not what makes us believers if you get the opportunity to explain the gospel to someone someone asks you the all important question why are you a

Christian don't start saying oh well I believe the Lord talk to me you may believe he did that may be your personal experience the reason you're a Christian is first and foremost because Jesus rose from the dead and if you don't believe that you're not a Christian that's it simple as that it's the most fundamental element the foundation of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus not of course raises all other questions and the next question it raises is well it was he really dead in the first place everyone saw that he was crucified on the cross and it was taken down and buried his body was taken down was he really dead yes he was he was pronounced dead there was no question about his death how then can you explain how this extraordinary person was crucified on a Roman cross and then he was raised again he couldn't raise himself he didn't have the power to raise himself the only person the only being with the power to raise the dead there is only one being and that's God it had to be that in the resurrection of Jesus God raised him from the dead and in so doing

God was making a statement to the whole world about this man Jesus of Nazareth now you don't need to go long into his life and into his ministry to discover that there are some the most extraordinary features of his life you know it really amuses me when I hear people talking about well he was a religious leader well he was a good man well he was a special man that's just so much nonsense nobody would ever say that if they really honestly read the four gospels truly with an open mind the problem is we don't have open minds we're not open to God speaking to us in the gospel and the first thing he shows us is how extraordinary this Jesus is he is quite simply unique he's not the best man that ever lived he's the only good man who ever lived he's the only man that could ever say which of you accuses me of anything doesn't matter how close you got to him you never got to see the dark side of him the people who are close to you are always the one who see the dark side of us we all have dark side except Jesus even those who lived with him from day to day they knew that there wasn't a single blemish in his character and his speech and his moods and his behavior nothing he's got incredible character and in his miracles and in his teaching and once again i've said this so many times before have you ever sat down and read for yourself do it again this time with an open mind this time asking the lord to reveal and to make known Jesus to you and to show you the answer to that question that Paul I saw of Tarsus asked who are you because once you become persuaded that Jesus is who he always said he was that he is God then that's the greatest challenge you'll ever have to face in your whole life what do you do with him God staring you in the face and the question still remains why did he die because if on the one hand Jesus was God he must have been in full control of every single God never loses control of one moment one millisecond in this world that's why he's God he couldn't be God otherwise and yet he died he was taken and arrested and brutally treated and nailed to a cross that's what we were remembering last Sunday as we sat around the the Lord's table and here's why his death is so special because it was deliberate it was no accident it wasn't an unfortunate occurrence in which God was taken over by forces beyond his control that's nonsense the death of Jesus was always in the controlling hand of God he laid down his life for a reason he did so willingly the Bible goes on to explain to us that it was the only way in which our sin could be washed and cleansed and so that we could escape the punishment of God which we will suffer after death if we die without him but if we die with him and in him then that punishment is taken away and we're given the promise of everlasting life in heaven where the focus will not be on me the focus will not be on what I want in heaven won't be focused focus will not be on my favorite food that's the way people like to view heaven isn't it that's the most trivial trivial way in which people think about heaven heaven will be

millions of times greater and better than that in which the focus will be the gaze and the glory of god and there won't be a single single person who won't be riveted and filled with the most extraordinary and permanent joy in that place the third thing i mentioned was that jesus was god and you know i mentioned that i'm sure that many of you perhaps think of that as well that's basic isn't it i must admit i've always grown up with that assumption i've been taught it from the time i was three years old that jesus was the son of god god in the flesh and i suppose as i grew up as you've done many of you who have who have a background of learning the christian faith we've grown up just to accept that and i must admit that for years of my life i accepted it as well without even thinking but when you come to think about it you know you don't have to confess to you and it's one of the things i struggle with i don't struggle with the fact that there's a god i have no problem believing that there's a god reason and logic tell me that there's a god i have no problem in believing that he created the universe it's just too great and complex and orderly for it just to have appeared by chance i have no problem tonight in believing there's a god i have no problem tonight in believing i am accountable to god i have a conscience that testifies when i go wrong and i know that's been put there by god and i know i have no problem logic again do you know what absolutely blows my mind do you know what absolutely i have no problem today in believing that god should deliberately enter into this world by becoming one of us do you know why it blows my mind because i think why should he do that why does the almighty god who has no beginning and no end and who is higher and greater and more immense than our wildest imaginations we haven't even begun to think properly about god we know nothing about him because he is so vast why should he not only take an interest in us but why should he actually become one of us to me to be honest i'll tell you this to be honest it's the most extraordinary truth i have ever come across do you know what makes extraordinary because there's only one answer to it there's only one answer that lies at the heart of god coming into our world in the person of jesus christ and becoming one of us and that's this his extraordinary immense indescribable love god is love that doesn't mean he won't punish that doesn't mean there's no day of judgment that doesn't mean that we're not countable to him and yet god is love so if you're fighting against him today you're fighting against his love you're running away from him tonight you're running away from his love it's a love that arrests us and draws us like the good shepherd leaving the 99 sheep in the wilderness going after the sheep that was lost

[36 : 03] and not stopping until he found that love i can't explain but you know why because i can't see anything in me that is worthy of that love there isn't anything in me there's nothing in you either that is worthy of that love it's the most incongruous truth and that's why i find it difficult but you know the more difficult it is the more marvelous it is and god is marvelous god is extraordinary god is unique and what he's done you can't explain but because he's done it in faith and by faith i accept it and the only way i can look at death tonight in the face is because of what god has done in his love for me for you for everyone else who simply accepts and receives that love in jesus christ it's a love that forgives all our sins it's a love that washes us it's a love that wants the best for us it wants to take us out of our darkness and ugliness and shame and filth it wants to change us he wants to change us and raise us to new people the problem is that we don't want him to change us because we like the awful things in life the things that make us ashamed are the things that tie us to the same place but god says tonight leave them behind get away from them come to me all you who labor all you who are weary and burdened and whoever comes to me said jesus i will in no way cast him out you know what i'd love right now i'd love half an hour with jade goody she's not alone why single her out i would hope that in that half an hour i'd be given the opportunity to turn the conversation around he knows it's awful isn't it it's the world that jesus came into it's the world that jesus invites to himself it's the world that he invites you in which he invites you i don't have half an hour with jade goody i have had half an hour with you we're all in the same position let's pray our father in heaven we pray tonight to hear your voice we pray not to ignore it we pray not to go away as we've done before imagining that somehow there is another alternative lord we pray that for once you will open up our hearts and our ears and take us away from our sinful pride and stubbornness and that you will make yourself known to us and change our lives as only you can and make us ready for that day when we will all have to stand before you

in jesus name amen