

Why the work of the Lord is worth doing

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[0 : 00] Now we turn now to our reading. So do please grab one of the church Bibles. And we're in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. And that's on page 961 in the church Bibles.

1 Corinthians chapter 15, page 961. And we're picking it up at verse 35 through to the end of the chapter.

Now Andy's been spending a few weeks in 1 Corinthians 15. And as we've been looking at, it's a chapter which is all about the work of the Lord.

It's about the nature of ministry. And some of those who Paul was writing to in Corinth were thinking that it should be more impressive looking than it really is.

It should be more impressive than Paul's ministry looks. And Paul wants them to stop thinking that way. He wants them to think rightly. Some are denying the resurrection. Thinking it's all about glory now, impressive looking stuff now.

[1 : 04] But Paul says that ministry is hard. The best is yet to come. The best lies the other side of death after the resurrection. So let's pick it up in verse 35 of 1 Corinthians 15.

But someone will ask, How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?

You foolish person. What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel.

Perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he is chosen. And to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same.

But there is one kind for humans. Another for animals. Another for birds. And another for fish. There are heavenly bodies. And earthly bodies.

[2 : 03] But the glory of the heavenly is of one kind. And the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun. And another glory of the moon.

And another glory of the stars. For stars differ from star and glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable.

What is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor. It is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness. It is raised in power.

It is sown a natural body. It is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, the first man, Adam, became a living being.

The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first. But the natural. And then the spiritual.

[3 : 03] The first man was from the earth. The man of dust. The second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust.

And as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we are born the image of the man of dust. We shall also bear the image of the man of dust. We shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

I tell you this, brothers. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep. We shall not all sleep. But we shall all be changed. In a moment. In the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound. And the dead will be raised imperishable. And we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable.

[4 : 04] And this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable. And the mortal puts on immortality.

Then shall come to pass a saying that is written. Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?

The sting of death is sin. And the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers. Be steadfast. Immovable. Always abounding in the work of the Lord.

Knowing that the work. That your work in the Lord. Is not in vain. This is the words of the Lord. Pray again just for a moment.

[5 : 06] Heavenly Father, we thank you for your words. We pray that you would indeed by your spirit speak to us. Give us clarity of understanding. Help us to obey what you say to us.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. This morning, I'm going to try and persuade you of the reality of something that Christians find it very easy to nod at.

But very hard to factor into everyday life. The thing that you need to be persuaded of and that I need to be persuaded of is the resurrection of the dead.

It's easy to nod at if you're a Christian. Kind of goes with a package, doesn't it? But very hard to factor into everyday life as though it's true and really coming.

Now there are many reasons for that. The main one, I think, is that we cannot yet see the resurrection of the dead. And what we can see at the moment, our own bodies and the course of our lives.

[6 : 09] Just look around the room for a moment. Look at your own body and the course of your life. The course is only downwards. It does not look promising, does it?

That's the reality we face every day. Every day you look up, you wake up, you look at yourself in the mirror and think, hmm, doesn't look better than yesterday. That's the way things go. What we can see does not look promising.

The resurrection of the dead, we can't see it at all yet. Now what this chapter does is to focus the attention on two pretty hopeless looking things.

Both of these things are there all the way through the chapter. Turn to 1 Corinthians 15 if you're not there already. The first thing that this chapter focuses on is, as we've already mentioned, the corpse, the dead body.

Something not terribly hopeful looking. The other thing this chapter focuses on is the Apostles Paul's ministry, his gospel work. And let me show you how they are woven together in today's part of the chapter.

[7 : 19] They run together all the way through this chapter. Let me show you how they're woven together in this part of the chapter. Look at verse 42. So it is with the resurrection of the dead.

We're talking about the dead body being raised here. What is sown is perishable. What is raised is imperishable. It's sown in dishonor.

It's raised in glory. It's sown in weakness. It's raised in power. It's sown a natural body. It's raised a spiritual body. Notice the pairs of words that he uses.

Perishable and imperishable. Dishonor, glory, weakness, power, natural, spiritual. Those are significant words in this letter. Because elsewhere in the letter, we come across words like this beforehand.

Just keep your finger in chapter 15 and turn back to chapter 4. And look at verse 8. Now we've come back to these sentences in chapter 4 fairly often.

[8 : 26] Because they describe what the Corinthians think of themselves in comparison with Paul, the one who brought the gospel to them. Verse 8.

Already you have all you want. Already you've become rich. Without us you've become kings. And would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you. For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all like men sentenced to death.

Because we've become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. Now listen to the words. We are fools for Christ's sake. But you are wise in Christ. We are weak.

But you are strong. You are held in honor. We in dishonor. To the present hour we hunger and thirst. We are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless.

And all sorts of other things that the Corinthians didn't like very much about the way Paul did things. You see the words here? Dishonor. Weak. Those are words that some of them are using to describe Paul's work.

[9 : 31] Whereas here and elsewhere in the letter they use words of themselves like powerful, spiritual, wise and so on.

Now in chapter 15, back to chapter 15, you see he's using their words. He's putting their words about him into a chapter full of discussion about the resurrection of the dead.

Now why is he doing that? Well, because he wants to link together in their mind the death and resurrection of the body with his pattern of ministry.

Of course, in some ways that's linked already. His pattern of ministry is in their eyes as likely to produce a result as the dead body is likely to climb off the slab and do a little dance.

They don't think his pattern of ministry is hopeful at all. His way of doing things looks hopeless to them. It's not powerful looking. So why does he want to put his ministry and the dead body so closely together here?

[10:39] Well, he wants to convince them that his pretty weak and hopeless looking pattern of ministry is in fact the only thing.

That will lead to the resurrection of the body. In the end. Now I'm putting this idea right at the beginning of today's sermon so that we have time to think about this as we go along.

For this is what we need to be convinced of too. That Paul's pretty weak and hopeless pattern of doing things is the only way that people can come to the resurrection of the dead.

Now we need to be clear about this friends because I think Christians often look back at the apostle Paul through rather rose-tinted spectacles. We think, what a marvelous man.

What a heroic figure he must have been striding across the Mediterranean world, proclaiming the gospel, preaching to thousands, performing miracles, influencing multitudes and so on and so on.

[11:42] But friends, if we think of him in that way, we are really not reading the scriptures rightly at all. The truth is that those who saw him in the flesh found plenty to complain about. Not powerful enough in his speech.

Not rich enough in his dress. Doesn't wear a suit or a clerical collar. Constantly in trouble. Doing a manual job to pay for his own ministry. I mean, fancy that for an apostle.

No significant financial backing. No distinguishable career path. They did not look at him and think, yeah, that guy over there, he's really where the power is.

Christians tend to think that if a thing is powerful, it will look splendid. That if something's going to be good enough to deal with sin and death, it's got to look the part powerful enough to deal with sin and death.

This chapter tells us that quite the reverse is true. The only thing that will deal with the tyranny of sin and death is the unpromising looking pattern of ministry done by the apostle Paul.

[12:52] It's the only thing. I wonder if we'll believe that. It's hard to believe that something that looks weak can be powerful. That something that looks dishonorable can, in the end, turn out a glorious result.

Let me show you that that is the shape of this part of the chapter. Look at verse 35. A question is raised. Someone will ask, how are the dead raised?

With what kind of body do they come? A question is raised. In verse 58, an instruction is given.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast and movable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. In this section, we move from how are the dead raised to give yourselves to the work of the Lord.

And by the work of the Lord, Paul means the kind of work that I've been doing. Even though the work of the Lord does not look promising, that is how the dead are raised.

[14:05] That work is not a waste of time. In fact, that is what will lead to a great result in the end. The Corinthians very much need to be persuaded of that. And it would be a great surprise to me if we didn't need precisely the same level of persuasion that they do.

Because like them, my guess is that we will assume that powerful looking things come in impressive looking packages. That only what looks powerful is powerful.

Paul's point here is the really powerful thing is not powerful looking at all. Now, with that in mind, let me run through the section. Verse 35.

Someone will ask, how are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? Stupid person, says Paul. He thinks that his Christian readers will have difficulty imagining how a dead body can be restored to life.

And you can understand that. Those of you who've seen a dead body will know that it does not look full of promise. But he goes on, don't be stupid.

[15 : 21] If you're a Christian, there are things you know to be true that need to be remembered at this point. He mentions three things. Three foundational illustrations, examples, ideas from God's world.

Here they are. First, in God's world, death often leads to life. What you sow, verse 36, does not come to life unless it dies.

He uses an example from agriculture. It's the dead looking part of a plant, the seed that comes to life. Here's the second illustration.

The end is often unlike the beginning in God's world. Verse 37. He continues with the agricultural image. And what you sow is not the body that's to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grade.

But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. The plant that comes up looks nothing like the seed that was planted. That's the point.

[16 : 28] Think of your garden, if you have one. All those plants and trees, how did they start? They started with variations on small, hard brown things.

They all started like that. All seeds look pretty much the same, plus or minus a few details. How different they look now. That is to say, if you've watered them and all that kind of thing.

They come up all sorts of shapes and sizes and colors and flowers and all that kind of stuff. Quite different looking from how they started.

You see, God has made it that seeds, which start off looking pretty much the same, grow into quite different looking things in the end.

And things that in turn differ from one another. Here's the third aspect of his illustrations. Not all created things are the same. Now, this is quite a long illustration.

[17 : 27] Verse 38 following. God has produced.

Bodies of quite different sorts in his world. Those are the three illustrations then. In God's world, dead looking things often lead to life.

And the end of something is often very different from the beginning. And there are many sorts of different bodies in God's world. Now, what he does now, having brought those illustrations out, he brings them to bear on the question of the resurrection.

These ideas apply to the resurrection of the dead. Verse 42. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. The first idea, do you remember?

That death often leads to life. Well, the first point he makes here is that just as dead looking seeds lead to lively plants, so the dead body will rise.

[18 : 58] What is sown is perishable. What is raised is imperishable. It's sown in dishonor. It's raised in glory. It's sown in weakness.

It's raised in power. It's sown natural. It's raised spiritual. Do you see that constantly? Sowing, raising a harvest. Sowing, raising a harvest. Sowing, raising a harvest.

Just as with seeds and plants, a great change will occur. In other words, just because something looks unpromising now, does not mean that it will look unpromising forever.

Just because your image in the mirror looked less promising today than it did yesterday, that does not mean it will be less and less promising forever. The dead body may look hopeless now, but that doesn't stop God doing something dramatic with it.

The ministry of the Apostle Paul, a sowing and reaping ministry, may look hopeless now, but that does not stop God bringing a great harvest out of it in the future.

[20 : 10] That's the first idea. The dead will rise. Second, the end of things will be entirely unlike the beginning. Remember the pairs of words again?

Perishable, imperishable, dishonor to glory, weakness to power, natural to spiritual. Just as with plants and seeds, something that looks boring and brown and small and lifeless will turn out amazing.

So it is with the dead body. Imperishable, imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual. Grand words, aren't they? With the resurrection, the end will be quite unlike the beginning.

And the third aspect of his illustration brought to bear on the resurrection of the dead is this. Just as everybody that God has made in the world, earthly, heavenly, animals, human and all that kind of thing, are not the same.

So, verse 46, not all men are the same. Now, folks, you need to concentrate here. So wake up and pay attention.

[21 : 31] Verse 39. Do you notice verse 39 and following? Paul makes a big deal of not everybody being the same. In verse 45 and following, he makes a big deal of the fact that there are two key men in human history and they are not the same.

Let me read. Thus it is written, verse 45, the first man became a life-giving being, a living being. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it's not the spiritual that is first, but the natural and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust.

The second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust. And as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. The point being made here is that there are two men who influence human life profoundly.

[22 : 49] In one sense, there are only two men influencing human life. Adam made from the dust, who when he sinned brought death and decay into the world for everyone without exception.

And Christ from heaven, who though he died, had a quite different end to his death. He did not return to dust.

Instead, he rose from the dead. Paul's point here is that there are two quite different men. In fact, two quite different Adams.

The first and the last. Now, why does he give so much time to this here? Well, because all our experience tells us that everyone dies.

And after we die, we return to dust. And that, of course, is the chief reason that we find bodily resurrection so hard to grasp.

[23 : 53] Because as far as we can see, every death leads to total bodily disintegration. That's what you'll end up as if the Lord Jesus doesn't come first.

Just earth. Every single one of you. Me too. But not every death has led to that future.

For Jesus' death did not lead to dust. There are two men who influence humanity, not just one. And that the effects of the second have not yet been seen.

The resurrection of Jesus will influence humanity even more significantly than the death of Adam. And the conclusion of this bit of the argument is in verse 49.

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

[24 : 59] If we're Christian, both of these men influence our lives profoundly. All of us have an existence that comes from the first man.

Namely, sickness and decay and death. Like him we sin. Like Adam we die. Like Adam we will return to the dust. Every single one of us.

There is absolutely nothing we can do about that. So profound is Adam's influence over our lives. That our lives are stamped all over with his image. Folks, that hardly needs to be said, does it? But actually it does need to be said. I don't know how you measure how your life is going. People measure that in all kinds of ways.

How their family is. How their business is. How your career is going. How much money you're earning. What sort of house or car. What sort of exam results. What sort of degree. I don't know which things of all of those or others.

[26 : 02] Are most important to you in your assessment of how your life is going. However. If in our assessment of how our lives are going.

We somehow manage to leave death out of the equation. We have missed the biggest thing. How will your working life be.

Good and productive if it leads to death in the end. How will it be good and productive if it leads in the end to the death of all those you've tried to serve in your working life.

How will your children's lives be good. No matter how well you brought them up. If death is the end for them. You see death swallows everything. All human activity without exception is chewed up and spat out by death at the end.

And yet so often we live life as though it's not going to happen. Often of course because it's too painful to think about. It's a dreadful reality. But there is something that makes it possible to think about death.

[27 : 12] Really. And factor it in. You see there is another man. And if you're a believer in him. In the Lord Jesus Christ. There is a future that will come to you from the last man. And that future is resurrection.

We have another future you see. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust. We shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. Now I think verse 50 wraps this up. I tell you this brothers. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. You see. It isn't our this world flesh. That will inherit the kingdom of God. How could it be? It's heading for the grave and for death and for disintegration. But just because we all die does not mean the future is hopeless. And that's what Paul goes on to next. How will resurrection happen then Paul? If it's not this world flesh that inherits the kingdom of God. Well look at what he says. [28:16] Verse 50. I tell you this. Sorry. Verse 51. Behold I tell you a mystery. I take it that that means it's not a secret. It's just something we can't get our heads around right now. We shall not all sleep.

But we shall all be changed. In a moment. In the twinkling of an eye. At the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable. And we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable. This mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable. And the mortal puts on immortality. Then shall come to pass. The saying that is written. Death is swallowed up in victory. How will resurrection happen? One. It will happen at the last day. Not until then.

Do human beings see in their own flesh. The effects of Jesus death and resurrection. You have to wait. You can't see it now. It's as certain. As the fact that Jesus rose from the dead.

[29:16] If you'll trust us in him. It'll happen at the last day. And it'll happen instantaneously. At the last day. Look at his emphasis on that. Verse 52.

In a moment. In the blink of an eye. The trumpet will sound. And the dead will be raised imperishable. And we shall be changed.

Just like. That. So dramatic will the coming of Jesus be. All of those things. That you've struggled so far. So long in life.

To put off. The wrinkles. The aging. The. The droop. You know how it is in life. All of that stuff. That you've worked so hard.

To be put off. The Lord will change. Bang. Like that. It's not a problem for him. To do that. Think of that. In a moment.

[30:12] You will never want to sin again. In the blink of an eye. You'll move from a person. Who experiences suffering.

And pain. And death. As a regular reality. To somebody who is immortal. And imperishable. Forever and ever. In the blink of an eye. That will happen. And the point is.

That only. At the last day. Will the effect. Of that second man's. Influence be seen. Notice the words. To do with timing. Verse 54.

When. The perishable. Puts on the imperishable. And the immortal. Puts on immortality. Then. And then only.

Shall come to pass. The saying. That is written. Death is swallowed up. In victory. Sometimes Christians. Use that phrase. Death is swallowed up. In victory. As though that's already happened.

[31:12] That's not a true statement. On its own. Death is swallowed up. In victory. Death is not now. Swallowed up in victory. Death will swallow us all up. No. Then.

On that day. Will come true. The saying. That death is swallowed up. In victory. And not until then. Only at the last day. Will death be seen.

To be defeated. In this age. Death wins. Every time. But not forever. Only at the last day.

Verse 56. Will the tyranny. Of sin. And death. And law. Be broken. Well folks. Our time is gone.

Let me draw. One or two threads together. And make one or two conclusions. It is very. Very. Very. Hard to imagine. The dead being raised. Is it not? Wonder around your local graveyard.

[32:09] And try to imagine. The reconstitution. Of humanity. When you know. That under the ground. All that remains. Is earth.

And bones. It is very hard. It is very hard. To imagine. So we often live. As though it's not happening. We spend all our time.

Trying to do things. That will last. Things of significance. Things that are positive. And upbeat.

Rather than being miserable. And downcast. Trying to make our mark. On the world. Trying to build something.

Or just trying to cram into life. All of those things. We feel we need to do. Before we die. Or we may be people. Who are of an age.

When we look back at life. Regretfully. Thinking of all those things. We haven't managed. To have a go at. And will now. Never manage. To have a go at. Worrying.

[33 : 08] That we've not fulfilled. Our potential. As human beings. Do you worry about that? Friends. Let me assure you. That 70 or 80 or 90 years. Is far too short a time.

To exhaust the potential. Of a human being. Made in God's image. Far too short a time. But for those. Who belong.

To the last man. There is. An eternity. To explore. Your potential. An eternity.

In a body. No longer. Marked. By the image. Of Adam. Now. Is not the time. For fulfilling. Your potential. If you're a human being. Now.

Is not the time. For looking. Splendid. Now. Is not the time. For making. Your mark. On this world. Neither.

[34 : 06] Is now. The time. For. The work. Of the gospel. To look. Splendid. Let me ask you. What do you want. Your Christian workers. To look like. What do you want.

Your minister. To look like. And your assistant minister. To look like. And what do you want. Your missionaries. To look like. Do you want them. To be. Honored. Respected. Powerful looking.

Do you want them. To wear a clerical collar. And a shiny suit. On Sunday. Do the expectations. You have of them. Mean that only a superhuman. Could do that job.

What do you want. Your gospel workers. To look like. Well the reality. Is that if they're doing. The right thing. They will be. Weak looking. Dishonored.

By the world. And altogether. Unimpressive. You happy for that. That's the way it is. If they look splendid.

[35 : 02] Unhonored. And everybody likes them. And they dress up smart. Every Sunday. And nobody ever beats them up. You can guarantee. That they're doing. The wrong thing. What do you want. Do you want them. To look good now.

Or do you want them. To do the right thing. So that resurrection. Will happen. Those are the only. Two alternatives. This is not the age.

For self-fulfillment. And for glory. In human beings. This is not that age. No. There's an eternity. For that. This is however.

The age. Verse 58. For the work. Of the Lord. Therefore. My beloved brothers. Be. Steadfast. He's talking to them all.

Immovable. Always. Abounding. In the work. Of the Lord. Because. In the Lord. Your labor. Though it doesn't look great now. Is. Not. In vain.

[35 : 59] Let's pray together. Let's just have a few minutes. To.

Reflect. On what we've heard. And to respond to God. In our own lives. In the quiet. And then I'll lead us in prayer. Our heavenly father.

We acknowledge. Before you. That we find it. Very hard. To factor in our immortality. To our everyday lives. We can't see the future.

That there is to come. We don't experience. The future. That there is to come. The resurrection. Of the Lord Jesus.

Is not something. We can see with our eyes. And touch with our hands. And we find it therefore. Enormously difficult. Not to live.

[37 : 18] For. The present age. And to be driven. Merely by what we can see. We pray that you would help us. To believe. From the heart.

The things that we've read. Today in the scriptures. We recognize that the Corinthians. Found these things. Very difficult to believe. They found it difficult. To believe that the body. The dead body.

Had any hope. And they found it difficult. To believe that the apostles ministry. Was a fruitful thing. We pray that. You would help us.

To take your words seriously. And we pray that the outcome. Of that. Might be that we would be. Steadfast. And immovable. Not distracted.

By what we can see. From in many. And various ways. Individually. And together. Giving ourselves. To the work of the Lord.

[38 : 12] Difficult as that is. In the present age. Knowing. That in the age to come. It will be seen. That that labor. Was not in vain. Please convince us.

Of these things we pray. And help us to give ourselves. To this work. We ask it in Jesus name.
Amen.