

# Two good reasons why we should be joyful at the prospect of death

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning. In 1988, England played Ireland in an international rugby match at Twickenham. This match became significant for two reasons.

The first reason is it signalled the resurgence of England as a force in international rugby, something which most of us here this morning probably have absolutely no interest in. But the second significant reason is because of this match, the England international team adopted its sporting anthem, an old gospel song traditionally associated with black Americans and American native slaves.

The plight of these slaves during and prior to the American Civil War. During the match, a player called Chris Otte, the first black man to play for England in over 80 years, scored a hat-trick of tries. And the England support erupted into a chorus of swing low, sweet chariot. This song, of course, has long been associated with rugby over many decades, but mostly for the vulgar lyrics, for the vulgarities that accompanied some of the lyrics.

[ 1 : 20 ] It was abused, really, and hijacked. It's a pity, this great gospel song. Because swing low, sweet chariot, in fact, to this day, no one understands why it has been adopted by English rugby.

It bears no resemblance at all to the idea of inspiring rugby players. And the reason is that it's a song about a man's attitude to his death.

It was written by an American Indian called Wallace Wallace. Let me remind you of the lyrics, some of the lyrics of Swing Low, Sweet Chariot. Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home. The allusion is to the prophet Elijah in 2 Kings, chapter 2. He was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. Notice the chariot is a sweet chariot.

It's not bitter. It's not ugly. It's not unwelcome. This man seems to have a positive attitude to his approaching death. In verse 1 he says, I looked over Jordan and what did I see?

[ 2 : 28 ] Coming for to carry me home. A band of angels coming after me. Coming for to carry me home to heaven. In verse 2, Sometimes I'm up and sometimes I'm down.

Coming for to carry me home. But still my soul feels heavenly bound. Coming for to carry me home. So what does a man's positive attitude towards his approaching death have to do with English rugby?

Absolutely nothing. So the song has been misappropriated, misconstrued and abused. It's not a fitting response to a rugby match.

So what's that got to do with us this morning? Well consider Philippians long considered to be the epistle of joy. Joy. Because the word joy appears perhaps 15 or so times in the epistle. And therefore the church, traditional church, has taken the letter to the Philippians to be the epistle of joy. But we have to be careful.

[ 3 : 37 ] Because the occurrence of a word in a biblical text doesn't necessarily communicate the meaning of the text. The word can be a motif. It can be the mood.

In fact, if we look closely at Philippians, we find that in every occurrence of the mention of joy, it's in response to suffering and death.

Let me give you a few examples. Chapter 2, verse 17. We have Paul writing this. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.

Likewise, you also be glad and rejoice with me. So what does it mean to be poured out as a sacrificial offering? Well, it's the same language that Paul uses in 2 Timothy 4 about his death.

In 2 Timothy 4 he writes this. For I am already being poured out as a drink offering. And the time of my departure, my death has come. So in fact, Paul in chapter 2 is communicating his joy at the prospect of his death.

[ 4 : 48 ] Again in chapter 4, verse 4. Paul writes, Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice. He's gushing with joy. And yet chapter 4 comes hard on the heels of the great resurrection.

Chapter 3, where Paul speaks about resurrection from the dead. Surely, Philippians can't be the epistle of death. Too morbid and depressing for us this morning.

At the recent Keswick Convention, Don Carson said that in our culture and society, there is only one remaining taboo. Now, Carson gives an example of calling his students together in a seminar. And he said, any subject was up for grabs. For example, homosexuality. Used to be a taboo subject. But now, openly discussed. Freely discussed. But Carson said, one day, he opened his meeting.

I want to tell you about how my father died. And it was as if he could cut the atmosphere with a knife. No one likes the taboo subject of death.

[ 5 : 57 ] So Philippians, in fact, has been misappropriated. It's not the epistle of joy. The prominent subject matter in this letter, in fact, is Paul and his approaching death.

Don't get too depressed because later we will see that death and joy meet in Philippians. They don't clash. They merge. But let's go through a brief survey to see the major argument that the apostle wants to make in the letter to the Philippians.

In Philippians 1, chapter 1, verses 21 and 23, you have this amazing, this astonishing claim. Paul says, for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which shall I choose? I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two, life or death.

My desire is to die, depart, and be with Christ, for that is far better. That's an astonishing claim when you think about it. A man who has a choice of life and death, and what does he choose?

[ 7 : 06 ] He wants to die and be with Christ. And of course, in chapter 2, verses 5 through 8, we have this great exhortation about Jesus. Paul says to the Philippians, have the same attitude as Jesus Christ, who although he was immortal, he was God Almighty, he empties himself of divine privilege and divine protection to be obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus' attitude towards his own death was one of self-renouncing the privileges that afforded him protection against his death. God, the immortal Jesus, sacrifices his immortality in order to die. Very positive attitude, of course, for us in the salvation event. And in chapter 2, verse 15, Paul instructs the Philippians to behave like, as shining like stars in the world.

Shine as light, should read shine as stars. This very odd phrase appears in only two books, Philippians 2 and Daniel, chapter 12, where it refers to those martyrs who were butchered under the famous Antichrist, Antiochus Epiphanes, and who would be resurrected from the dead and shine like stars.

So Paul is using resurrection language and applying it to the Philippians in chapter 2. And again, we have in this description of Epaphroditus, his friend who delivers him a gift in prison, chapter 2, verse 28 and 29.

[ 8 : 47 ] I am the more eager to send him, Epaphroditus, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor, such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

What makes Epaphroditus admirable is that he came close to the point of death. It's quite appropriate that we have our Normandy veterans here today because in a sense they follow the pattern of Epaphroditus.

These men came close to death so that we might live in freedom. And it's fitting that we have their medals, their badges of honor and esteem for this is what Paul assigns to Epaphroditus.

How do you esteem men like this for they came close to death? Epaphroditus, of course, was a soldier of Christ. And then again, very briefly, the last two examples we have in chapter 3, the whole argument seems to spiral around the idea of resurrection from the dead.

And in chapter 3, verse 12, Paul writes, not that I have already obtained this resurrection from the dead or I'm already perfect.

[10:10] An odd phrase. The word used for perfect is in Greek to leto, which means to finish. And it normally means in the New Testament to finish something by dying.

Paul uses this word in 2 Timothy 4, 6 to 8. He says, I have fought the good fight. I have finished or perfected my course of ministry.

In other words, I'm at the point of death. And the great cry from the cross that Jesus made to tell us I, I have finished my work through my death.

So we see the pattern in Philippians. The argument is one where death is the prominent subject, not joy. and yet the motif is peppered throughout the epistle.

What are we to make of this? Paul writes Philippians to a church who are suffering and facing the prospect of death. He wants to encourage them.

[11:12] How would you do that? How would you encourage a friend or a loved one who was suffering and facing the prospect of death? What words would you choose to encourage them? Philippians then is the swing low sweet chariot of the New Testament.

Paul wants to encourage the church in Philippi. He wants to communicate his joyful response to the prospect of his death. And he does it using the fantastic magnificent subject matter of resurrection.

So today we are going to look at resurrection as the prize. death brings the prize of resurrection.

And there are two points we would like to make this morning.

First of all, resurrection power should be eagerly anticipated. Resurrection power should be eagerly anticipated. If we start with chapter 1 verse 21 to 23 the verse we have already read, it is very important because in this verse Paul addresses the falsehood of annihilationism.

When the body dies so too does the soul. Such is the belief of the atheist. What Paul says in verse 21 is yet which shall I choose life or death?

[12:32] I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better. In this passage Paul is describing an immediate conscious existence with Jesus after his death.

His soul doesn't go to sleep when his body dies. Rather his consciousness continues in a different state. He is disembodied or he is with Jesus.

He experiences the presence of Christ at his death. Very important. Soul sleep is the idea that when a person dies their soul goes to sleep.

and wakes up at the resurrection. Not a very popular teaching in the church today but nonetheless one which has prevailed over many centuries and you do get in certain denominations.

But the idea that the soul or spirit enters an unconscious state is unbiblical. It comes from the metaphor used in the Bible for death.

[13:42] Sleep is a metaphor. For example Paul speaks in 1st Thessalonians he writes about those who have fallen asleep. But the connection between sleep and death is simply that both states are temporary.

Sleep and death are both temporary. But the soul doesn't go to sleep at the point of death. It lives on. The Bible consistently represents the dead as being conscious after death.

Remember Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus. These two men died. One went to heaven and one went to hell. The rich man in hell pleads with Abraham asking him to send Lazarus to hell to give him some respite for his torment.

And Abraham responds and says no those in heaven cannot come to those in hell. That void is too great. The rich man then negotiates with Abraham okay then can you please send Lazarus home to my five brothers and warn them about this place called hell.

And Abraham responds saying no. If your brothers did not read Moses in the scripture they will not be by the argument even if a man is raised from the dead. Now what's important about this parable that Jesus tells us is that this dead man this rich dead man has his memory intact he remembers his family his brothers he remembers Lazarus the beggar who begged outside his mansion he has emotions he has concerns for his family his personality is intact his memory is intact and he is feeling he's a dead man he's feeling his soul his spirit is continuing in its consciousness and of course there's many other passages such as the thief on the cross Jesus says to the thief today you will be with me in paradise you will experience my presence you will be with me many more passages convey the notion of a continued consciousness after death yet there's still a tendency that even in evangelical circles that we think of resurrection as an awakening how many of us here this morning picture or visualize a resurrection as being a coming up from a sleep now let's look at

what

[16:20] Paul writes about resurrection with this view of consciousness of the soul what does he say in verse in chapter 3 verse 10 the main text for us today he says this about Jesus that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings becoming like him in his death if perhaps I may attain the resurrection from the dead what does it mean then when Paul says that I may know him and the power of his resurrection what does it mean to know Jesus the context here in knowing is taken from the old testament where knowing God has to do with personal experience and intimate relationship for example in Hosea chapter 4 verse 1 the prophet writes hear the word of the Lord O children of Israel for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land there is no faithfulness or steadfast love and no knowledge of God in the land inherent in the knowledge of God in the old testament was obedience loyalty a sense of conformity to the character of God biblical knowing in these contexts requires an intimate relationship even

Genesis chapter 4 verse 1 we have the statement that now Adam knew Eve his wife and she conceived and bore Cain this conveys a sensual knowing of course it was sexual in that passage the same as Matthew chapter 1 verse 24 and 25 Joseph took Mary his wife but knew her not until she had given birth to a son and he called his name Jesus clearly a sensual knowing of a sexual kind and clearly countering the notion of a perpetual virginity for Mary knowing in these passages does not refer to a cold knowledge of facts Paul isn't talking about knowing about Jesus Christ he's talking about an intimate interpersonal relationship even the most rampant atheist knows about Jesus I'm sure Richard Dawkins knows about Jesus he studied the text he understands the miracles the claims of the church but he does not have that intimacy or connectedness with Jesus Christ that the church has an example could be David Cameron we all know David Cameron as the prime minister we know things about him but Samantha Cameron his wife she knows him in a different way and this is the knowing that Paul conveys about Jesus in chapter 3 the sense of an interrelational experience with a person not cold facts about him there's a quite scary verse in the Bible in Matthew when Jesus is confronted with offended opponents and they say Lord Lord we preached in your name we cast out demons in your name Jesus and Jesus said I never knew you away from me you evildoers so this is a stern warning for us now isn't it and it's a test of our faith are we in intimate relationship with Jesus we can come to the church for 20 years we can attend all the meetings get baptized we can study the new testament in

Greek we can go to college we can do theology ecclesiology Christology but are we in intimate relationship with the son of God Jesus Christ is my first love is the cry of Paul in chapter 3 of Philippians to know Jesus then is to have an experiential intimate connectedness with him but here's the crux for us this morning you'll notice that the clause also includes the power of his resurrection chapter 3 verse 10 should read that I may know him and I may know the power of his resurrection what does that mean what does it mean that Paul will know the power of the resurrection Paul here is communicating his desire to experience the power of Jesus in resurrection the resurrection is not just a cold doctrine of the church resurrection is an interrelational event it's an interrelational event it's experiential and it's intimate and that makes perfect sense you know when we think of

Paul's explanations in chapter 1 verse 23 he talks about the continuity of consciousness of the soul the soul doesn't die the soul lives on with its memory and its personality therefore what happens at resurrection what happens to the conscious living spirit of a person with all of its memories and personality well according to Paul chapter 3 verse 10 Jesus Christ takes the conscious personality laden memory filled soul and spirit of a believer and reconstitutes that person's personhood by joining the body the soul and the spirit living and conscious are joined with a new pristine organism the new resurrection body it suggests that he will be aware of that consciousness of the spirit means that you'll be aware of your resurrection probably you'll feel your resurrection the soul isn't asleep so resurrection seems to be an ecstatic dynamic event body and soul coming together real true personhood reconstituted under the power of Jesus sounds quite exciting in fact in chapter 3 verse 10 the word that Paul used for power is *dunamai* which is where we get our word dynamite [22:54] Paul describes resurrection as a dynamite event it's explosive it's ecstatic the soul and the spirit will feel it will experience the new body I don't know if there's tingling feelings that will go through the body we can't speculate on that but we can certainly infer legitimately from the text that resurrection will be a felt experience you will be aware of your resurrection you'll feel it you'll be conscious you'll know what's happening the sensational power of Jesus is going to work on our

dead bodies at resurrection amazing what Paul writes about resurrection in chapter 3 I wonder how it will feel when we are resurrected when our old bodies are reconstructed from the old material and we are brought back together again as a full person under the power of

Jesus I once knew an old lady who told me that she believed in resurrection but she didn't understand how it would work with someone who had been cremated so it was her earnest desire that she be buried or interred she had concerns about cremation didn't believe that God could reconstruct a new body from material scattered over many areas many miles of area but enfleshing the bones that were interred seemed to be no problem you see the wrong headedness about this as if God needs a set of bones to work on it's the kind of language of project management isn't it in the office where you walk into your boss and you say I've got a good idea and he sits you down and says well that's the bones of a good idea we need to put some flesh around that so 1500 meetings later after spending one million pounds of the company's money and 50 more people in the project and you still haven't got a project that's working so this idea that

God needs a set of bones to operate on really is an impoverished view of the power of God the God who speaks the universe into existence by a word doesn't have to have a set of bones to work with so the old lady I mean I wish I could have quoted Jesus to her because there's a great story where Jesus encounters a group of Sadducees they were challenging him on resurrection they said to him resurrection it's not true let me give you a scenario so they make up the story of the woman who married seven men not all at once but one after another seven brothers and then they challenge Jesus by asking him to explain who will be her husband in the resurrected life if she's married seven men and after Jesus corrects their wrong view of resurrection he says the problem with you is you don't know scripture and the power of

God so that old lady that doubted cremated people could be resurrected her problem was that she did not know scripture and the power of God we've all met those Sadducees haven't we we've all met those people who say I don't believe in resurrection I don't believe in miracles that's not true there is no such thing as not believing in resurrection resurrection isn't a belief issue it's a power issue what these folks don't believe in is a person with that amount of power who can raise the dead so at the end of the day it always comes back to Jesus so are you anticipating the power of Jesus Christ to operate on your dead body would you be willing to die so that Jesus can exert his power for his glory upon you so the second and very quickly point that

Paul makes in Philippians is that the resurrection prize is eagerly awaited the resurrection prize is eagerly awaited we notice in chapter 3 verse 11 Paul expresses a doubt that he will indeed achieve the resurrection a literal interpretation is this that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings becoming like him in his death if perhaps I may attain the resurrection from the dead if perhaps clearly conveys the sense of doubt here we have the great apostle having doubts that he will be raised from the dead is it possible for a saved Christian someone who's believed in Jesus who's trusted in him for salvation who loves him and desires to serve him is it possible for a person like that not to be resurrected and Paul says yes yes it's possible and the answer is in verse 20 what prevents a Christian being resurrected verse 20 but our citizenship is in heaven from it we await a saviour from heaven we await the coming of a saviour here Paul introduces the idea of the second coming of Jesus the parousia the word which says the arrival of the king the presence of the royal king this of course is the great doctrine of the church we are waiting the second coming and at the second coming there will be two types of

[ 29 : 03 ] Christian those who are dead and those who are alive in fact in 1st Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 13 to 18 we have a great description of the parousia the coming of Jesus 1st Thessalonians of course was a church where they were worried about their dead friends and loved ones they were worried that those dead Christians would miss out on the great event of the parousia when Jesus comes back physically and bodily as predicted in the book of Acts and Paul likes to them to correct their opinion that the dead would miss the parousia and this is what he writes but we do not want you to be ignorant brothers about those who are asleep those who have died that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope for since we believe that Jesus died and rose again even so through Jesus or rather

God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him so at this coming Jesus is actually bringing back with him the disembodied church your loved one or your friend who has died will be in the parousia train they will be returning with Jesus as he comes back the second time and Paul writes to reassure this church in Thessalonica that the dead are not disadvantaged and for the dead

get the priority because Paul says for the Lord himself in verse 16 will descend from heaven with a cry of command with the voice of an archangel and with the sound of the trumpet of God and the dead in Christ will rise first the dead in Christ get the priority at the parousia when Jesus returns then we who are alive we who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air now we see why Paul doubts his resurrection he doesn't know if he'll be dead or alive when Jesus returns the parousia of Jesus the second coming of the Lord is the great event we look forward to however it will rob you of a resurrection because you will not die interesting but here's the crux for us what does Paul prefer does he prefer to be dead when Jesus returns or does he prefer to be alive when Jesus returns well the answer is unambiguous isn't it in Philippians he says I want to be dead I prefer death because I want to experience the power of Jesus Christ going to work on my dead body an amazing attitude to death isn't it puts resurrection in a different perspective puts the parousia in a different perspective when I became a Christian it was in America and in America more prevalent than this country there is a teaching and I think Bob Fyle may well talk about it when he goes through Revelation about the rapture of the church in order that the antichrist can't wreak his tribulation horrors on the church and then Jesus returns to fight the antichrist at the battle of Armageddon I used to believe that I used to think that was a reasonable theology I've changed my mind but I can say this that nowhere in the Pauline literature is the idea that the church should think of escape from suffering or death it is un-Pauline it is non-Pauline Paul desires to be dead so that he can experience the power and the intimate inter-relational connectedness with Jesus Christ this is a positive attitude to death let me ask you this morning then finally folks what would you prefer I used to think that being alive when Jesus comes back would be the best thing for you see him riding out the clouds on his big white horse some of the images in Revelation and you get to escape death that's a bonus I've changed my mind I think I'm with Paul in Philippians I think I'd rather be as dead that I might experience the power of Jesus Christ in conclusion then what is Paul's attitude to the prospect of joy of death it's joy what's his attitude to the prospect of death bring it on bring on death says Paul death has lost its sting for Jesus Christ has such a magnitude of power that I will feel I will experience the power of his resurrection what's Paul's attitude to death bring it on swing low sweet chariot of death because you bring me the prize of the power of [ 34 : 36 ] Jesus Christ resurrection let's pray heavenly father we give you thanks that you sent Jesus the first time thank you that he did not shirk suffering or death but he was obedient to the point of death even death on the cross and thus he buys us he wins for us our salvation our eternal life and we thank you also father that you will send him a second time and that we might anticipate the power that he will wield to subject all things under him and that we will enjoy and experience and anticipate the power of his resurrection come Lord Jesus we are ready and we are waiting Amen hang We'll see you then.