

4. A Saviour from Heaven

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[0 : 00] Now let's pray together. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

But our Father, how we praise you for the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who spoke creation, the one active throughout history, the one who died and rose again and ascended to heaven, the one who sent the Spirit and will one day return in power and great glory.

We thank you for that life-giving, life-changing gospel, that gospel that's unaffected either by the opposition or by the faithlessness of people, not affected by the decrees of church assemblies and courts who depart from your word, not affected by fanatics who speak so often nonsense about your word, but the living, life-changing gospel, Jesus Christ who died, who was buried and who was raised again.

And that is the word that we come to today in the midst of hopes and fears, in the midst of doubts and uncertainties, in the midst of the vulnerability of our lives.

We take our stand on this solid rock. We take our stand on the fact that in Christ alone my hope is found, this cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm.

[1 : 43] And so, our Father, we come to you today in the middle of the day, in the middle of the busyness of the day, in the middle of the many duties which we have left and to which we will return. From our own personal, family, communal lives, we come to you knowing that in Jesus Christ and his word there is a message for each of these.

And knowing as we look beyond the doors and walls of this building, there is a message for everyone. There is a message for the businesses and financial institutions of this city.

There is a message for the nations of the world. There is a message that comes with a challenge to every heart and to every life. And so bless us, Father, as we study your word together.

Help us to hear what you are saying to us, but not only hear but to obey. And we leave here at the end of the service. Help us to leave as those who are certain that from life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands our destiny.

That is our prayer and we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Now, we turn to our Bibles, please, on page 961.

[3 : 04] As I said, this is the final study in this great chapter where Paul has spoken about the facts of the gospel, Jesus dying, being buried, and being raised again, where he's talked about the implications of that, both for the world and for the individual, and where he's answering questions that his original hearers are raising.

Now, we're going to be studying verses 50 to 58, but I think to get the flow of the argument, we'll start at verse 35, the bottom of page 961.

1 Corinthians 15, verse 35. 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 has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same.

[4 : 16] There is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, 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 star differs from star in 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 the 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 spirit.

The last Adam became a living being. Sorry, the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the natural, and then the spiritual.

[5 : 22] 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 off the dust. And as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are off heaven.

Just as we have borne 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, 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, 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 the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.

[6 : 34] O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? 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 in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

Amen. May God bless to us those great and wonderful words. Now, if you heard the words, and you probably did, of that American charlatan, false prophet, preacher, Harold Camping, and you believed him, you wouldn't have been here today.

Because he said the world was going to end on May the 21st. Apparently, the prophecy has now been changed, and it's going to be October the 21st.

Now, there are always two problems when we're talking about the end of the world. There are fanatics like that man Camping, false prophets, who in spite of our Lord telling us that no one, not even the angels in heaven, know the day or the hour, predict the date of his coming.

[7 : 59] And on the other side, there were many of these kind of people in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland this week, scoff at it and say, where is this coming that he promised?

And that's why, very far from ignoring passages like this, very far from playing them down, we need to affirm all the more strongly that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

You see the sequence of Paul's thought here. He's presented the saving gospel. Christ died, he was buried, he was risen. He's told us about the sure hope, the hope of his return, in which he will raise the dead and transform the living.

And now, in this final section, we're coming to the Saviour from heaven, the one who will carry this out. Now, his coming is not described here, although it's implied.

Later on, look up 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, where it's described in more detail, the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God.

[9 : 08] And here, this is summed up just in this little phrase, the trumpet will sound. Christ is coming, Christ will raise the dead and transform the living.

And in 1 Thessalonians, Paul says, we know this because of two things about, we know about Christ, which have already happened. If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then we also believe that those who belong to him will be raised and transformed at his coming.

So that's what Paul is thinking about here. And the key phrase is the phrase, in vain, the last words of the chapter, it is not in vain.

This is what makes Christian life and witness not in vain, picking up from earlier in the chapter in verse 2, unless you have believed in vain. As he talks about this great event, there are three stages in his thought in verses 50 to 58.

Two of them are future and one is present. First of all, in verses 50 to 53, he talks about an amazing transformation. Verse 51, we shall not all sleep, we'll not all die, but we'll all be changed.

[10 : 27] Passage is full of colour and imagery. The words sing, the words dance, the words are full of power. And they are very memorable words, but they're also very practical words.

You see, this passage that we read and talked about last week about the resurrection body, seems to be contradicted by experience, doesn't it? We still sin, we get older, our bodies decay, and we shall die.

So the resurrection seems to contradict all our experience. Now Paul, in these previous verses, have said, when the body is raised, it won't just be the resuscitation of a corpse, which would not be a very attractive idea.

It will be a glorious new body, although it's organically linked to the one that went before. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable, sown in dishonour, raised in glory, and so on.

But now Paul turns to deal with another question. Why? That's what happens to the dead, to those who are already gone. What is going to happen to the living?

[11 : 36] That last generation of the church will still be alive and on earth when Christ returns. And that's why Paul says, verse 51, I tell you a mystery.

Paul's not going to give us a whodunit. He's going to tell us some truth that he received by revelation. That's what mystery means in the scriptures, a truth that we could not work out for ourselves simply by observation.

But God has revealed what will happen. What will happen to the living when Christ returns? Well, Paul says, the living will be transformed. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, all be transformed.

You see, he said, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Just as those who have died and whose bodies have decayed cannot enter the kingdom of God in that state, neither can those who are still alive enter the kingdom of God with their bodies unchanged, with all their limitations.

See, from the moment of conversion, from the moment you come to Christ, you begin the journey towards the full image of Christ, what Paul has called the image of the man of heaven.

[12 : 49] God has called the name of God. And when we see him, that transformation will be complete. John the Apostle says, when we see him, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

So the living will be transformed. The bodies of the living will also be transformed to be like Christ's glorious body. And this will not be a lengthy process. It won't be something that will evolve throughout thousands of years.

Paul says, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. A point of time you can scarcely compute because it's so short.

But you notice what Paul says consistently throughout his letters. In Romans he says, whom he justified, he also glorifies. This is the moment that Paul talks about being glorified when we are like Christ.

It's important to realise what that means. If we are justified in this life. That's one of the ways in which Paul describes what happens when we come to Christ.

[13 : 55] When I was a boy people used to say justified means just as if I had never sinned. Now you think that was awfully clever. But it's not. It's not good enough. Just as if I'd never sinned simply puts me back in Eden with the possibility of all going wrong again.

Justified in the New Testament means that before I stand before God, and I'm judged, I've already been given a favourable verdict. That's why justifying and glorifying go together.

In the blink of an eye at the last trumpet, God's people will all be transformed into the image of Christ. An amazing transformation.

As I said last week, we will all be beautiful. More difficult to imagine in the case of some of us than others. But it is true. We shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is.

Everything that God made you to be, all the potential He put in you, spoiled here by sin and by decay, will burst into glorious splendour in the resurrection body.

[14 : 58] That leads on to His second theme in verses 54 to 57, a glorious triumph. Verse 54, When the perishable puts on the imperishable, the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that was written.

Now remember, Paul said right from the beginning of this chapter, this gospel is according to the scriptures. In other words, if you read your Old Testament, you'll find it all there. The seeds of it, the teaching, flows from there.

And he quotes from two prophets, from Isaiah and Hosea. Death is swallowed up in victory. That's quotation from Isaiah 25, Isaiah looking beyond the time of exile, beyond the time of desolation, not just to the return of God's people to Jerusalem, but to the gathering of all God's people in the new creation.

He will swallow up death forever. And Isaiah wrote this, Psalm, the surrounding peoples had a grim God whom they called Moth, the God of death.

And his jaws reached from heaven to earth and swallowed everything, swallowed everything that came into his path, just as death does. Isaiah is saying that one day that swallower will himself be swallowed.

[16 : 25] That's what Paul has said already. He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. Death is going to be swallowed up in victory.

And then he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, O death, where is your victory, O death, or O grave, where is your sting? Paul is taunting death here, isn't he?

He is throwing defiance and even ridicule at it. Rise of a cartoon I once saw in a Christian magazine of two Roman soldiers sitting in a tavern one sunny evening and as they drank together they were discussing the events that had happened.

One of them was, one of them, this was in Jerusalem, one of them had been there for a long time, the other had just come and the one who had been there for a long time said to his friend, have you ever heard about Jesus?

The friend says, no, I can't say, I can't say I have. And he says, he's all the sensation at the moment. He was mixed up in four funerals and spoiled every one of them.

[17 : 35] That's the, that is the kind of rollicking way in which Paul taunts death here, O death, where is your victory, O death, where is your sting? But of course we know that death is terrible, death is evil, death is, death is something that makes a grim frontier post above, to all our hopes, to all our ambitions.

And that's why verse 56 is here. Not irrelevant, the sting of death is sin, the power of sin is the law. This is a reminder of the big story of the gospel. Why is there death in the world?

Death is there because of sin. Sin came into the world and death by sin. That doesn't mean individual singing and individual dying. It means these two grim lords came into history after the fall of Adam and sin and death have dominated the world stage ever since.

These two grim tyrants. So that death is not just a natural process. Death is the result, the consequence of sin. And that's why Paul says the power of sin is the law, not because the law is bad, but because we cannot keep it.

That's the point. Paul is saying unless we have believed in this gospel, unless the living Christ has come to us and lives in us by his spirit, then sin and death are still dominating us.

[19 : 13] but thanks be to God who gives us the victory, gives us the glorious triumph through our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul is reminding us that everything good in this world and in the world to come comes through our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, in the future, there is, in the future, there is this amazing transformation and there is this glorious triumph. If one wouldn't it if Paul had simply stopped here in verse 57 on a high note.

We could all have gone away feeling edified to bits with a warm, gooey feeling inside. The Bible doesn't do that because the Bible knows we have to live in the present.

And therefore, he ends the chapter with what I will call a stern testing. What about the testing time before the glorious triumph and the amazing transformation?

Who knows what any of us still have to face before that day arrives? And in conclusion, Paul concludes this glorious chapter by saying two very practical things.

[20 : 29] Paul says, because of these truths, we can have sober realism about the present. Be steadfast, always abounding, the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour.

We need to stand. We need to persevere. Because all these glorious truths are real, it doesn't mean we can go away now feeling, oh, it's, I don't need to worry.

We still have to live by faith. And the word labour is important, isn't it? It is hard and tough being a Christian. If you're not a Christian, that is important to realise.

It is glorious, it is wonderful. But, it is also tough. We've got to keep on persevering. And, notice it says, don't be grudging, always abounding in the work of the Lord.

Because it's worth it. It's not in vain. So, a sober realism about the present. But, the second thing is a robust faith about the future.

[21 : 39] One thing to have sober realism about the present, that's absolutely necessary. But, if all we have is sober realism about the present, it's going to be impossible to keep on being steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord.

Notice what he says. Notice the important thing. In the work of the Lord, he's not saying in the work of the church, he's not saying keep on going because the church is so wonderful.

It's a great body to work for. Those of us in the church of Scotland after this week can scarcely say that is true. Whatever church you're in, there'll be problems, there'll be difficulties, there'll be heartaches, and often you'll feel, and often you'll feel like giving up.

It's in the Lord. And it's not in vain. What the difference does it make that it's in the Lord? Now the fact that he is the Lord means he's going to have the last word.

The fact that he is Lord means that sin and death are not going to have the last word. It means the problems of this life are not going to have the last word. It means my weaknesses and my lack of faith are not going to have the last word.

[22 : 52] It is in the Lord. And because it's in the Lord, it's not in vain. As you see, the resurrection makes sense of the whole story. The story of creation and the story of salvation.

It holds them together. Christ is risen. That means not only are individual people saved, but there'll be a new creation, a glorious new creation. And also, as we finish, the significance of the present.

No true gospel work for the Lord is going to be in vain. It will last into eternity. So the more firmly we believe that Christ has died, has risen, has ascended and will come again, the more urgent it is that we abound in all lawful and worthy activities until he returns.

Because we know that none of that work done in his name will be in vain. Amen. Let's pray. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, we are often weary, we are often fickle, we are often discouraged and even depressed. And we know that we will never completely get rid of any of these things as long as we are in our mortal bodies.

[24 : 22] But help us to keep on going, to be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. Because in the Lord that work is not in vain.

And we thank you in his name and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.