

What Happens When We Die?

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 28th of May 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, What Happens When We Die? and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verses 51 to 58.

I love mysteries, especially the sort of whodunit variety. Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Inspector Morse, A Touch of Frost, Sherlock Holmes, I've read them or I've seen them and I'm a real sucker for those sorts of mysteries because I always want to pit my wits against the ingenuity of the detective or the sleuth or the great Hercule Poirot or whoever the key character is.

But I can never do it. I think of all the mystery books that I've ever read or all the mystery films or TV programs I've ever seen, I've hardly ever, ever picked who did it.

My grey matter in here never seems to get results. There seem to be too many red herrings and too many butlers to pick out which one did it. So when St. Paul begins the chapter or the section that we've just heard tonight, I'm captivated.

[1 : 2 6] Listen, I will tell you a mystery. And I'm all ears because I love mysteries and I love trying to work them out, even if I never succeed.

But this is not Inspector Morse or Sherlock Holmes' St. Paul version declaring what his ingenuity and his cleverness, his brilliance, his little grey matter in here has found out to be what is elementary.

St. Paul is telling us a mystery because he himself has been told it. It's been revealed to him. He hasn't suddenly clicked and worked it out and realised who the butler was hanging on the cross.

The mystery that St. Paul is about to reveal is what happens to us after death. Or maybe better put, what happens to us in the life to come.

Greeks, and that's who the Corinthians were, believed that the body was fairly unimportant in the end, it would be discarded in the life to come, and the soul or the spirit would live on.

[2 : 4 3] That explains different Greek philosophies about the use or abuse or non-use of the body. But basically they believed that it was the spirit or the soul in particular that was immortal.

And it would live forever. And the real person was the soul. The body was just a temporary shell for the person. But that's not Christian theology.

Though sadly it is what many Christians actually think. In this chapter, St. Paul has been arguing for the fact of the resurrection of Jesus' body from the dead and the importance of the fact of the resurrection of Jesus' body from the dead.

And now in effect he gets to the point about saying, well what does that mean for us and our bodies and our life to come? And that's the mystery that St. Paul is revealing to us in these last verses of 1 Corinthians 15.

Listen, he says in verse 51, I will tell you a mystery. And then come the words that should be pinned above the door to the creche.

[4 : 01] We will not all sleep. We will all be changed. Our translation has die, but the word can also have the sense of sleep.

That's the key to this section. We shall be changed. Not that our body is going to be left behind and dumped and our soul lives on forever, but that we, we will be changed.

The physical bodies that we have now are not to be discarded, but changed. Transformed. They're not really now yet ready, fit for heaven.

They need changing. The Greeks were right about that, that our physical bodies are not fit for heaven. But their solution was to throw them out. But the Christian solution is to transform them and change them.

How and when will that happen? St. Paul goes on to say it will happen in a moment. In the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet.

[5 : 20] In a moment that is in a split second. In an atomos is the Greek word. Hence we get the word atom. Now it doesn't mean an atom, but it means the smallest unit possible.

Now these days people could split the atom and maybe St. Paul would have chosen a different word. But that's what he means in the smallest possible unit. In a twinkling of an eye.

That is in a blink. Now they didn't have sort of slow-mo, super-duper video type things that can break things down into thousands of seconds that are even shorter than our own blinking of an eye.

But in St. Paul's days, the blink of an eye was the fastest sort of thing. And the idea is that you look at something and you blink and it's changed. Instant change.

That's what St. Paul is talking about here. That's the change that he's describing. One minute we're physical bodies and blink and we're transformed. We didn't see the change. But we've seen the result.

[6 : 23] An instantaneous change is what St. Paul is talking about. And when will this occur? At the last trumpet. He doesn't mean by that that there's going to be a whole number of trumpets and we'll be able to tell when it is because it'll be the seventh trumpet or something like that and we realize that we're actually up to the third and the fourth and therefore we can calculate ahead roughly to when we need to be ready.

The last trumpet is the trumpet at the last time. That's the trumpet that will sound for these events to occur. Trumpets occur a number of times in the Old Testament and usually in significant occasions.

Trumpets mark the end times, the day of the Lord coming in the prophets such as in Joel, for example. They also sound or herald major Old Testament feasts, festivities, banquets, celebrations in the presence of the Lord.

And the third major category in which the trumpets occur in the Old Testament is in warfare. The most notable example is the destruction of Jericho and the blowing of the trumpets around the city before the walls fell down.

So they're the themes that are caught up here. The end time. The celebration and feast and banquet.

[7 : 51] The gathering of all God's people together in God's presence, that is. And victory. The themes of the Old Testament. Paul is alluding to when he says it will happen at the last trumpet.

It is a day of triumph, a day of festivity. It is the last day. The end of history. And of course he's talking about Jesus' return.

There's no doubt about that. There are enough places in the New Testament that link the idea of the last trumpet with the return of Jesus at the end of history. When I was a teenager at school one of the things I disliked a lot was going on cadet camp.

Now I got out of some of the worst bits because I was in the bagpipe band. So I didn't have to do the long marches overnight carrying everything on my back and so on. But let me tell you that cadet camp at Puckapunyal in August was cold and bleak.

And before light, I suppose at 6am but it might have been earlier who knows, who can remember, the trumpet would sound reveille.

[9 : 02] And up we'd get, we'd had five minutes to get out of bed dressed into our army gear, boots on, out on the parade ground for a brisk march around the parade ground in the dark before we'd go off somewhere for breakfast.

It was awful. It was dark. And we were half dead with tired because invariably we'd be up late playing cards.

It was freezing and we hadn't yet had breakfast. And I must say it's with some reservation that I read the note that says that this last day will be heralded by a trumpet and we, the dead or the sleeping, shall awake because I have cadet camp imagery in my mind and I think, oh no, I'm going to be sort of staggering into heaven bleary-eyed and cursing the trumpeter.

But this won't be cold. It'll be warm. It won't be dark. It'll be full of light. It won't be awful.

It'll be wonderful. It'll be the opposite of walking around a parade ground at 6am in August in Pakapunyal. It'll be fantastic.

[10 : 23] People often ponder, do we go straight to heaven when we die? That is, the moment somebody dies, are they in heaven? Or are they perhaps somewhere else or still in the body awaiting the final day?

Where is somebody between the point of death and the last trumpet? Jesus said to the thief on the cross, today you'll be with me in paradise.

And so many people assume or like to think that from the instant of death a person's in heaven, already there. And that verse does support that sort of view.

But the more common view in the New Testament, and one that in the end I do not think is contradictory with that one, is that the dead sleep, to use the biblical term, unconscious until the last day when Jesus returns.

Now it's probably the case that from death to the last day we are oblivious to anything else happening. That is, when somebody dies we can say with assurance and confidence if they're a Christian that the next thing they will know, as if it is in a moment, is being awake in the presence of Jesus on the last day.

[11 : 47] Some say philosophically that once we die there's a sense in which time is transcended. So really somebody does actually arise on the last day straight away because time doesn't quite work in the same dimensions there.

I'm not so sure about that. But I think it's certainly true to say when a Christian dies the next thing they will know is rising to greet the Lord Jesus on the last day when the trumpet sounds.

The dead shall rise. Those who are asleep shall be awakened by the trumpet's clarion call. Last week I took somebody to a football match at the MCG.

It was the first time he'd been to the MCG and the first time he'd been to an AFL game or an Australian rules game. And I'd suggested to him the week before that he should wear a tie.

I meant by that tie and jacket but I did just say tie. Because being members of the MCG as he'd just become I thought it would be good to show him around the long room and all those prestigious places that you all covet no doubt.

[13 : 01] But I realised when I picked him up that he wore a tie but not a jacket. And of course when we got to the door of the long room he couldn't get in without a jacket. Now you might think that this is all very snobbish but I happen to think that codes of dress are important in various places.

You might think it's a bit of nonsense but let me tell you that if you arrive at heaven not dressed appropriately you won't be allowed in. Jesus told a parable about that remember. But Paul is saying the same sort of thing here.

He is saying that we need to be clothed aright if we are to gain entrance into God's heaven or immortal life in heaven. See what he says in verse 52 after saying at the last trumpet the trumpet will sound the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed for this perishable body must put on imperishability that is literally be clothed with imperishability and this mortal body must be clothed with immortality.

That is you won't be allowed in if you're mortal and perishable. If you haven't been clothed with imperishability and immortality you won't be allowed into God's heaven.

You won't be allowed in. To the life that the last trumpet ushers. Heaven requires the right clothes. It's got a strict dress code. Even more so perhaps than the MCG long room for members.

[14 : 28] Paul is not talking about discarding bodies here. He's talking about transforming or changing or clothing our bodies aright. Our physical bodies are subject to wearing out.

to decay. You don't have to get very old before you realize that that's the case. We need a transformed body for an eternal place.

We need an eternal body for an eternal place. We need an imperishable body for an imperishable place.

An immortal body for an immortal place. See heaven is a substantial place. It's not airy fairy land where souls just sort of float around amorphously.

It is a real place for real people. And they need real bodies. But not just the bodies we have. Transformed changed bodies.

[15 : 34] Imperishable and immortal. It's hard to imagine. The closest picture we ever get is Jesus' own resurrection.

Even there perhaps the transformation is incomplete before the ascension. But the model of Jesus' resurrection is the model for us. As he rose, so will we.

As his physical body was consumed into his transformed body, so will ours. As his physical body transformed into an eternal body rose to heaven, so one day will ours be if we are followers of him.

And when that happens, death will be no more. It isn't just that we die and we rise changed and then later on we're going to die again and we'll rise somehow changed into a third entity or something like that.

When this day comes, when the trumpet sounds, when Jesus returns, death is gone, forever, in any form, completely annihilated, completely non-existent in any way, shape or form in this heavenly life.

[16 : 47] St. Paul uses the words, it is swallowed up in victory. It's gobbled up like some of those computer games you can play. Never to be seen again, never to be felt again, never to be stung with death's sting again.

So St. Paul laughs at death. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? St. Paul is full of mockery and derision here because death for so many people throughout the centuries has been the final enemy, the great tyranny which human beings cannot overcome.

And St. Paul, almost on the boundary line, is pointing to death on the playing field saying, come on death, where's your sting? It's gone. Where's your threat?

It's gone. Where's your power? It's gone. It's defeated. He's laughing at them. It's just like team supporters when their teams do badly, week in, week out.

In the end, they turn on their coach and their players and mock them. I remember being at Edgbaston Cricket Ground in 1995 when England lost to the West Indies before lunch on the third day of a test match.

[18 : 05] England has always been atrocious, in my living memory almost, and they were pathetic in this match. Absolutely dreadful. And at the end, when they've been defeated by an innings, the English supporters poured onto the field and stood outside the English dressing rooms shouting and shouting for the blood of Atherton and I think it was Illingworth, the coach, and the whole team.

They were disgusted with them. They were taunting them and mocking them and deriding them for being such pathetic cricketers. That's what St. Paul's doing to death here.

He's laughing at it. Oh, death has boasted that it's a great strong power. Death has boasted that it will eat up everybody. Ha ha, St. Paul says, you're weak, you're defeated, your sting's being taken out, you're pathetic, you boast about being powerful, but you're nothing.

The sting's being drawn out, like a bee sting that has to be taken out. It's gone. It's gone. And the poison has been drained out at the empty tomb detox center.

Death is a tyranny and it carries a sting, not just because it's the end of a process of natural decay, but because the sting of death is human sinfulness.

[19 : 39] We were made for life with God forever. But human sinfulness, human failure, human error, human immorality, human unbelief, has meant that death now carries a rather ghastly sentence for us all.

death. Our failures and sins condemn us to eternal death. That's the sting. That's the fear.

That's why people grieve when people die in one sense. That's why so many are scared of death. But death is just the symptom.

the cause is human sin. Medical scientists for the last 150 or more years have spent copious amounts of energy and paper and effort and money to try and put aside death or overcome death.

But in the end, they're just dealing with the symptoms. If only they spent their energy and concern on dealing with the cause. death and overcoming human sin, if that were overcome, death would be no more.

[21 : 06] God gave laws to his people in both Old and New Testaments in order to guide them about his standards, about whom and how they should love and how much, command so that people would know what is the right way to live, all good and noble.

full of good intent, a signpost to God's perfect ideals. But because within us we fail constantly and inevitably, all of us without exception, the function of God's laws has a flip side.

God's not on the power of the power of sin is the law.

But God doesn't stop there by just giving us laws, which in the end lead to our condemnation. He provides the way out. Not through our own ability or ingenuity or moral strength, far, far from that.

But through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' death was to be in place of our death.

[22 : 45] He attracted all the stings that were meant for us, copping our stings so that death has no sting for us anymore.

And his resurrection, fact, as Paul has made clear earlier in this chapter, is the guarantee of our own victory over death. The sting's truly gone.

We can know that because Jesus died for us and rose and the tomb was empty. So Christians ought not to be afraid of death anymore.

Its sting is gone. Now death is the gateway to glorious life with God in heaven forever. Imperishable life. Abundant life.

Life that's far, far better from the life that we're living now. Even tragic death, death of young people, death by accident here and now, is in an eternal scope.

[23 : 49] No tragedy if the person who died is a believer in Jesus Christ. For the life they'll live for eternity will far, far, far outweigh in value and enjoyment the life they might have lived for another 30, 40 or more years on earth.

Heaven's not just wishful thinking. It's the best there is. And it beats this life by far. Even for those of you who are optimists about this life, heaven far exceeds all of that.

And many days, if not most days, I long to be in heaven. And if I had the option to go there now, I would.

It would beat the best of this world, hands down. And I long to be there. And part of the reason I long to be there is that I long to be changed.

I long to be perfect. I long to be a person without sin that takes such a strong grip in my life.

[25 : 08] But even now, in this life here, there are tastes and glimpses of victory. Because notice what verse 57 says, But thanks be to God who not will give us the victory, but gives us the victory.

The victory of resurrection begins now. There are glimpses, there are foretastes of it, now, in this life. Enough to make us eager for the rest to come.

Just like that little morsel of a nice roast meal that your mother might give you an hour before lunch, just as it's cooking. And you think, Oh, look, it's whetted my appetite. I want more.

That's what God has already given us now. In the best things of Christian living, in our relationship with God, in our fellowship with Christian people, in seeing some sin in our life overcome, and knowing the joy of the resurrection now, they're the glimpses before the main meal.

They're meant to make us eager and thirsting and hungering for what lies ahead, but with confidence and sureness that the fullness of it still awaits us for certain.

[26 : 21] But not only that. The reason I don't go to heaven now is because God has, for me, like all of us, work to do here.

Labor for the gospel. Live for Jesus. And that's why we live now, in this mixed up world of good and bad, for the sake of the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus, for the sake of other people in this world, for bearing witness to the glory of the empty tomb.

And because Jesus rose, our labor is not in vain. Because Jesus rose, our living for Christ's sake will not be futile.

futile. It won't be empty. It won't be meaningless. It won't be a waste of time. For the work of the gospel lasts for eternity.

Forever. It transcends death and it's the only thing that does. And that's why Paul ends this fantastic chapter about the resurrection by bringing us straight down to earth in the last verse of the chapter.

[27 : 38] Therefore, my beloved, he says, in light of the fact of Jesus' resurrection and its importance and its implications for your own transformation and anticipation and certainty of being in heaven, now then, live, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

For Paul, he knew that his preaching of the gospel was not in vain. because Jesus rose. The gospel's powerful. And even if there are many people who refuse to hear it, who clog up their ears and blot out their eyes and harden their hearts to the words of gospel truth, Paul knows that his preaching and his living will not be in vain.

And for us too, the same is true. The greatest architect designs the most extraordinary buildings, but none of those will be by the paved streets of the New Jerusalem.

The greatest footballers score terrific goals for Richmond time and time again, but none of those results will even be important next year, let alone in the New Jerusalem.

Nurses and doctors care for the sick, seeking to heal, seeking to give relief. But in the end, all their patients are going to be dead in a hundred years at the most anyway.

[29 : 15] In the end, it's the work of the gospel alone that will last forever. Our words, our actions, our attitudes, our prayers, our love for the Lord Jesus Christ, and our love for other people, they are the things that will last forever.

And those labors now will not be in vain because Jesus rose from the dead. None of those things I mentioned are bad or wrong in themselves.

I'm not meaning to say we shouldn't care for the sick or score goals for Richmond or build extraordinary buildings. But what I am saying is that only the labor of the gospel lasts forever.

And the motivation for laboring is that Jesus rose. Labor then, knowing that your labor will not be in vain.

Amen.