

Prayers

Opening prayer

Shout aloud to the God of our salvation! He has blessed us, He has healed us, He has challenged us, He has helped us, He has forgiven us, He has changed us, He sustains us, He delivers us, and He has reserved a place in heaven for us! Praise be to God for the wonderful things He has done for us! ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: vision

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to bless you with a clear picture of Himself and His glory, so that you can praise Him

2. For your friends and family

Pray for your friends according to the all that the Lord has placed on your heart concerning them. Pray that they will be blessed through your love and care

3. For the church and its work

Ask the Lord to give His people a vision of His love and compassion, so that they can fulfil His purposes for them

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

As you listen to or read the news today, pray for God's wisdom on the stories of the day. Pray according to all that He has placed on your heart

Meditation

Why not try? Why not live a life of faith
And find out if your soul is really free?

Why not see if faith will hold you up when all else fails,
And whether 'God is love' means more when life is tough?

Why not help the poor unstintingly, and suffer for it,
Not feel pain for doing what is wrong, but what is right?

Why not pray when all seems irredeemably lost,
And find out if the Saviour really saves the perishing?

Why not tread the impossibly narrow path of faith?
Friends will think you foolish; God will think you wise!

Why not open up your heart to feel the Spirit's wind?
To explore the riches of the life that God has given you?

Why not take the plunge and be fulfilled in Christ;
Then die with Him, and in His time, be raised again in glory?

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

⁵⁰ I tell you this, fellow believers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does what is perishable inherit imperishability. ⁵¹ Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the 'last trumpet'. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

⁵³ For what is perishable must put on imperishability, and what is mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ Then, when what is perishable has put on imperishability, and what is mortal has put on immortality, then the word that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

⁵⁵ ‘Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?’

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; ⁵⁷ so thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! ⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear fellow believers, stand firm, immovable, always doing more in the work of the Lord, because you know that your hard work is not in vain in the Lord.

Review

In the longest chapter in 1 Corinthians, Paul has explained the resurrection and its central importance to the Christian faith, defended this against all manner of misinterpretation, and explained something of the nature of the resurrection life. Now at the end of this considerable feat of theological and doctrinal explanation, Paul seems to summon up within himself a last great call to the Corinthian Christians to put aside their divisions, speculation and dissent, and agree their destiny in Christ. He called all Christians to face the inevitable truth of the resurrection, not with the solemnity of facing death like a great unknown, but with the confidence and supreme assurance of faith. Our passage today is a rallying call for Christians around the theme of the resurrection; surely, those who know the transformation God can bring to this life will know that he can do much more, and re-create the human soul for a life of eternity!

As we read this passage today, the word ‘resurrection’ is nowhere to be found; it is assumed. Instead, Paul weaves a series of themes together to tell us with enthusiasm, joy and genuine excitement about what lies ahead for all who love Christ and anticipate the resurrection. In the light of Christ and His resurrection, it was impossible to think that people could ‘inherit’ the next life in some automatic way (15:50), as if there was a natural transition from this life to the next. This was a commonly held belief amongst Gentiles in the first century, as it is today. No, Paul said, the true nature of what happens after death is indeed a ‘mystery’ (15:51), but of one thing he was confident. Everything would be modified, transformed, varied and altered; ‘we will all be changed’, said Paul. This was the only characteristic of the resurrection of which we can be completely sure!

Paul had to explain all this to a sceptical Gentile church, many of whom had been brought up believing that death was but an extension of this life. Using all his authority, Paul described as in a vision the instant nature of resurrection change ‘in the blink of an eye’ (15:52) and at the call of the ‘last trumpet’. This was the victory call of God when His battles were won against all evil. At that moment, everything Paul had said about the resurrection (15:35-49) would be fulfilled. The nature of this life would be exchanged for something new, the imperishable nature of a new life appropriate to the Kingdom of God. Paul was so excited about the prospect of all this that he repeated himself, twice describing the change from mortal to immortal and perishable to imperishable (see verse 53 and 54)!

As so often there was a verse of Scripture in Paul’s mind, this time from Hosea 13:14;

‘Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from Death? O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction?’

When we read the translations of this available to us now, we can see a loose connection with what Paul says in verses 54 and 55, but it seems far from a quote! Paul, however, was reciting a version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) that he knew, but is not in use today. The meaning of the quote however is clear. Hosea prophesied in despair, asking whether God was willing to save His rebellious people; but Paul quoted Hosea’s words in triumph, for in Christ, Hosea’s despair had been answered. The victory over death had been won!

Paul finished his outburst with a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God who had won this victory over death and secured eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (15:57). His last words of encouragement continuing to challenge the Corinthians to hold on to the truths of the faith as they had been taught, asking them to persist in doing those good works that proved their faith in this world. The last thing Paul wanted was for anyone to become so focused on speculation about the resurrection that they abandoned their duties and obligations in this life!

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- We will all be changed!
- Mortal and immortal, perishable and imperishable
- Victory over death

Notes on the translation of the passage

V51 'We will not all die, but we will all be changed'

there is an enormous amount of interest in this passage, and the early manuscripts show that early Christians were very uncertain about what it meant; so much so that there are a wide range of different Greek versions of this in the ancient manuscripts. This happened because the passage suggests that Paul thought he might not die, but by the time the manuscripts were circulating and being copied later in the first century, he had! However, this is not the point of what Paul said, as we see in our study.

V52 'at the "last trumpet"'

The words 'last trumpet' are in quotation marks because they refer to a special call at the end of a battle, like a final summons.

V54

This whole verse is mostly a repeat of the previous verse, but in a different verb tense because it describes the fulfilment of the command given in verse 53. The similarity of the two verses means that a number of the ancient manuscripts show signs of error as copyists who wrote them 'lost' where they were and accidentally omitted parts of the text!

V54 'the word that is written'

This is a construction used by Paul to indicate a reference to Scripture. 'Written' is the Greek word 'gegrammevos' which is used throughout the New Testament in reference to the Old.

V57 'so thanks be to God'

Most Bible versions have 'but thanks be to God ...'. However, the translation I have given allows for a far more logical connection between verses 56 and 57, and it reads far more smoothly from one verse to the other.

The passage we have read today is relatively self explanatory, but it is worth exploring further the ideas of change contained here. It is not quite as straightforward as we might think, and the description of mortal and immortal, and perishable and imperishable becomes rather complex! Finally, the last few verses not only contain good advice, but also reflect Paul great confidence in the resurrection of our Lord.

We will all be changed!

The first point Paul makes in this passage is that 'we will all be changed' (15:51); so resurrection means nothing unless it means 'all change!' He expresses this firstly by saying; 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,' Now, the words 'flesh' and 'blood' are often found separately in Scripture, each describing what is mortal. However, the phrase 'flesh and blood' is rare, and is found in the New Testament only three times; here, in Matthew 16:17 and Hebrews 2:14. Jesus said these words to Peter when he had made his first confession of faith;

'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven' (Matt 16:17),

and in Hebrews, the writer speak of Jesus sharing of humanity so that He could defeat death;

'Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death' (Hebrews 2:14).

Paul's point was simple; God's people are those who have responded to Christ and therefore have received the assurance and hope of eternal life, as he points out in many of his letters (e.g. Romans 5 and 6). However, this inheritance cannot be received fully whilst we are 'flesh and blood' and therefore still live this life. What we experience now is only a fraction of what God has in store for us in our full 'inheritance'. We can only receive this full inheritance of our faith when we go to meet our Lord, either when He comes again, or when we die and go to meet our Lord. We live by faith today, because there is a complete barrier between the present life we lead and the completion of it in glory; the life we live now is mortal and perishable, and the full inheritance in immortal and imperishable.

Verse 51, which introduces the idea of the resurrection as a great 'change' has caused great controversy in the past, though it does not appear too controversial to us now. The phrase 'we will not all die, but we will all

be changed', says more than at first we might think. People who first heard Paul say 'we will not all die' thought that he was saying that some of those who heard him would not die before the Lord came again in glory! A similar thought is found at the end of John's Gospel, where in John 21:20-25, the evangelist has to deal with some misunderstanding of what Jesus said that was taken by some to imply that Jesus would come in the lifetime of one of the disciples.

There are two ways we can understand this phrase. Firstly, the word Paul used was 'fall asleep' (Greek 'koimaomai') which was Jesus' favourite way of speaking about those who had died, possibly of those who would be awakened at the resurrection! So the phrase could mean that not everyone will 'fall asleep' and then be raised, however 'all' would certainly be changed, one way or the other, at the resurrection. The other way of reading the passage is to say when Jesus comes in glory, as Paul expected and as we expect today, we will face the change of the resurrection, whether at that very moment we have either died or are still alive. Of one thing Paul is completely sure, and this is that 'we will all change'.

Mortal and immortal, perishable and imperishable

The image Paul used for this change was that of the trumpet sound. There is some speculation in Judaism that a 'trumpet sound' referred to the last call of a battle, and this may have been on Paul's mind; the battle of course, being God's earthly battle with all evil, and the trumpet sound indicating the final defeat of Satan and all evil. However, it seems that Paul also used this picture to describe the very last sound on earth before the 'End' and the coming of God's rule on earth (see 1 Thess 4:16). Certainly, in common with all descriptions of that moment in scripture (e.g. Matthew 24), it will happen unexpectedly and without warning, in the 'blink of an eye' (15:52) and without time for human thought or reaction. This, of course, is the idea that most scares people, but it is only a concern for us if we like to be in control of everything in our lives and we find it hard to release that control to God. If, on the other hand, we are happy for the Lord to control everything in our lives, then the resurrection 'in the blink of an eye' is no threat whatsoever, because we know that God has all things in control, and He loves us.

If we look at the structure of what Paul says in verses 51 to 54, then it is clear that he wanted to emphasise that there was no going back on this change. 'We will be changed' is said twice (v51 and 52), and the substance of that change is said twice (v53 and 54). In each of these verses, the change is described as from perishable to imperishable and from mortal to immortal. Each time the change is mentioned (four times in all), the change is described in the same way; 'what is ... must put on ...' twice in verse 53, and 'what is ... has put on ...' twice in verse 54. It is hard to convey what Paul means in an English translation, but I will write below a more exact version of what Paul says, and although it does not make proper English sentences, this will help you gain a sense of what he meant. I have typed in bold those words that are different to my translation above;

*'For **this** perishable must put on imperishability, and **this** mortal must put on immortality. Then, when **this** perishable has put on imperishability, and **this** mortal has put on immortality'*

You can see that the word 'this' focuses on the present life in this world, and in each contrast, a worldly quality is re-clothed with a heavenly quality which is totally and completely opposite to the earthly quality. There is a great paradox here, for on the one hand Paul says that at the resurrection everything will change and the change will be complete; on the other hand, the change is described as one thing 'putting on' another. This makes us feel that the transformation from one to the other is not as unrecognisable as we might have thought!

I have to say that in researching this text, I find that in each book I have read, the authors are trapped between saying that the resurrection change is complete and total, but on the other hand saying that what we experience here and now will be reflected in some way in what we find in the resurrection life. If we were to press the point we should ask whether the resurrection is a total change or is it not? If it is a complete change, why should we recognise each other, for example? But what meaning would the resurrection have if we could not recognise each other and relate to it in some kind of knowledgeable way?

The paradox is never entirely clarified in Scripture, and we are left with these two facts about the resurrection. It is indeed a complete change, the like of which we cannot perceive, and we cannot go back. Secondly, we will also be changed individually and recognisably to God. Now there are times when we can use our modern understanding of philosophy and even the common logic of arguments to run rings around these two seemingly contradictory ways of looking at the resurrection, but we can be content that it remains a mystery (15:51), and must remain a mystery. What we know might seem paradoxical, but must surely be true. The resurrection must surely be utterly different from what we experience now, but also, the assurance that God preserves us individually as we are 're-clothed' with immortality, for example, is a profoundly helpful insight.

Victory over death

As we study this passage, it is too easy to become bogged down in the meaning of what is said and lose sight of the spiritual reality of Paul's exuberance and enthusiasm for what he is saying here. For one such as Paul, who would have spotted the paradoxes perhaps more quickly than we do, such problems were of no concern. He could live with paradoxes, but he could not live without knowing that his Saviour had defeated death!

The passage he chose to quote from Hosea is perhaps rather strange, and not many quotes from Hosea appear in the New Testament; so this is significant. I have broadly explained the difference between what Paul says in this passage and the text of Hosea 13:14. The fact is that when Hosea spoke these words, he prophesied about the Lord's agony over whether to save his own people from death, likening it to the agony of a midwife who has the power of life and death when making a choice between saving mother or child in a complicated delivery. She does not know whether the mother will survive or the child will be still-born and indeed whether the decision taken will mean the death of both. The passage is heart-breaking, as much of Hosea is, but Paul uses it for totally the opposite effect! He uses the same words but in a radically different way, to indicate God's certain victory over death and the inevitable outcome of defeat for all evil and the power of sin! It would take many reams of paper to write down a full analysis of how Paul achieves such a complete turnaround! Nevertheless, he used for victory some words of the Old Testament that describe utter failure, but perhaps Paul did this to say precisely this, that the resurrection was utterly beyond our comprehension and utterly unexpected. It is, as we would say 'snatching victory from the jaws of defeat'!

The last two verses of our passage are typical of Paul, who brings his subject back down to earth as he closes, speaking of the moral implications of what he has said. It sounds almost mundane for Paul to say 'therefore ... stand firm ... do more ... work of the Lord ... your hard work is not in vain in the Lord' (15:58). However, Paul was right to say this. He was not any the less upbeat in speaking this way, for Paul regarded working for the Lord as being an immense privilege and certainly not the chore we sometimes make it out to be. He also knew full well that many people of his day took the view that if the resurrection was secure, then it did not matter what you did between now and then. Throughout his letters, Paul fought this notion tooth and nail. A secure belief in the resurrection meant that the Christian should be all the more committed to do what was right in this world and be utterly committed to it. The glory of the resurrection is that the truth of it raises a person's spirit and zest for life now.

Discipleship

Application

The resurrection is surely a precious promise of God which fulfils a number of our basic needs as people and as disciples of Christ. We need to know that in God's heaven, all evil and mortality is defeated, and that Satan has no power or authority. Paul's great transformation of Hosea's prophecy is so complete, people know this as a quote from Paul, but probably not as a quote from the Old Testament! The victory of the resurrection swallows up death; it has no power over us once Christ has been raised, and even though people live and die in the time between Jesus' resurrection and His coming again, all who have placed their trust in Him will be raised with Him when He comes again in power. In addition, as we learned elsewhere in this chapter, we will reign with Him in glory until God completes His re-creation (15:23). So there is no need for us to fear the coming of our Lord at any moment of time, and no need for us to fear death should it come to us at any moment of time. If we are living in the Lord's will and following His ways, then He will account for everything so that we need not fear abandonment, and all our concerns will be dealt with by our Saviour who knows far more about us than we can know or understand.

As a young person, I was faced with this when I heard an evangelist say at a meeting 'Jesus is coming soon'. He paused and challenged everyone about whether they had heard what he had said, and then repeated himself; 'Jesus is coming soon'. He then paused and asked everyone to search their hearts and be truthful to themselves about whether they feared this prospect or welcomed it; and repeated 'Jesus is coming soon'. Now I know that many will have seen this as a call to believe in the second coming of Christ, and I have no doubt that the evangelist concerned has this in mind. However, I recall having no problem with the idea that Christ would come again, what touched me deeply was the fact that the resurrection could happen to me that very moment, and every moment since. I was stunned at the thought that my career might stop and all I enjoyed would come to an end (and much more) and was forced to consider whether the glories of God were worth more than the all I knew and experienced at that time. And I have to say that life was quite good for me at that time! It took a few days for me to yield to the idea that I could indeed let everything go freely, and be content that God had everything in control; my life would not collapse, it would be fulfilled, and if I truly loved my Lord I would be happy, not sad!

Consequently, I was therefore able to come to the place where my faith for this life was enriched by this simple knowledge of the resurrection, and it has enabled me to feel complete and fulfilled in my vocation in Christian ministry. For this, I thank God. Death has no power over me, and I know it!

Questions for groups

1. Is it always possible or wise to view death positively? Why is it that many people find it difficult to talk about death?
2. Discuss in your group the picture raised in your mind about the 'last trumpet'. What does this mean?
3. How can we know that death is defeated in this life? Discuss the different evidence available to us.

Discipleship challenges

- *Spend some time praying and talking to the Lord about your own feelings about death. If possible, tell Him what you feel about your own death, however far away it is, and praise the Lord for the prospect of your resurrection and the glory of eternal life. If you cannot do these things, listen to what the lord is saying to you.*
- *Pray for all who face death constantly because of illness or because of persecution. Pray for their strengthening and their courage.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, hear what we say to You;
Listen to our hearts, feel our emotions;
Answer, when we call on Your name;
Lord Jesus, we are confident in You alone AMEN
