

A Life of Death

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[0:00] So 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and verse 30 to 34, just a very short section this morning I'm going to read. And the Apostle Paul writes, and he says this, he says, And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour?

I face death every day. Yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained?

If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Do not be misled. Bad company corrupts good character. Come back to your senses as you ought and stop sinning, for there are some who are ignorant of God.

And I say this to your shame. This is the word of the Lord. Let me pray. Merciful Savior, we are very, very, very much dependent upon your Spirit to help us as we study your Word.

We need Him to open our eyes to see the truth of Scripture. We need Him to apply Scripture to our hearts and we need Him to transform us in response to what we see in Scripture.

[1:17] So won't you meet with us this morning? Won't you have that special mercy upon us? Won't you help us to see clearly what is in Scripture? Won't you help us to see your Son, Jesus, and change us by what we see?

We ask this all for Christ's sake and His glory. Amen. Amen. Sorry, this is my fault that the bags are still going around.

Don't blame the deacons. Blame the pastor. So we have just celebrated Easter. Easter. And maybe for you, Easter came and then it went and you ate all your Easter eggs and forgot about Easter already and you're back to just the ordinary rhythms of life.

Maybe for you, though, Easter is still fresh in your mind. And the things that we spoke about at Easter time are still fresh in your mind. And it's a time when churches around the world stress the importance of the resurrection for obvious reasons.

It's a time when you'll see lots of Christian ministries giving a lot of time and energy and attention to defending the idea of a bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. So if you're online, you'll probably around this time of year see all sorts of videos, YouTube debates and that between Christians and non-Christians about the historicity of the resurrection.

[2:39] Now maybe you've spent a lot of time thinking about the resurrection over the last week, both from a historical point of view, so did it actually happen? And then from a sort of theological or pastoral point of view, like what does it mean for me?

What difference does it make to my life? But the reality is this. It can be really, really hard to experientially take hold of the resurrection.

And what it means for you. All of the time. So you might have come on Sunday and you might have thought, oh, that was great.

We learned about the resurrection. You felt convicted by this news of the resurrection. You might watch a really compelling lecture online about the historicity of the resurrection and the veracity of the evidence. But then you go away from all of that and you go back to your week.

You go to work. You go to the particular ups and downs of work, struggles there, some good things, some bad things. You go back to family life and the highlights and the lowlights of just being in a family.

[3:47] You go back to ordinary life and the demands of ordinary life sort of bury those great themes of the resurrection.

Something you don't believe them, something you don't sometimes think about them, but they're just clouded out by everything else that's going on around you. Your heart and your mind aren't 24-7 fixated on the future, your future resurrection body that you're going to have one day.

On the new creation, on what it's going to be like to live with God forever with no tears or pain or suffering or sin. Now I say this to you this morning, now we're in a space and we're talking and thinking about theology.

But imagine what it would be like to live with a very real, very tangible sense of the power and the reality of the resurrection every single day. All day.

Imagine how empowered you'd be as a person. If every single bone and fiber in your body was absolutely convinced of the reality of the resurrection all the time, there was no doubt, you would live an incredible life, would you not?

[4:58] I mean disappointments and hardships in life, they wouldn't shake you and break you in the same way that they might otherwise. Success and power wouldn't corrupt you and puff you up and make you proud.

You'd be willing to take major risks in your life for everything that is good and right and true and holy and just. Because you know that because of the resurrection there's a real sense in which you just can't lose.

You can't lose. If the resurrection is true and your faith is in Christ, then you cannot lose at life. Isn't that an incredible thought?

No matter what you're doing with your life right now, you cannot lose at life. Imagine how confidently and boldly you would live if you believed that every single second of every single day. Now, as a pastor, as a person who spent a lot of time studying and thinking about the resurrection and its implications, I long for this all the time.

I long for a greater sense of the resurrection. That doesn't mean that I'm not intellectually persuaded by the historicity of the resurrection. I am. That's why I'm a Christian. I believe it happened.

[6:07] But boy, boy, boy, do I wish that it would loom more largely over my life every single day.

Now, the apostle Paul, he had it loom over his life. In fact, that's one of the arguments he makes when arguing for the resurrection. It's a pretty simple argument.

Paul looks at the skeptics and the doubters around him who are questioning that Jesus might have come back from the dead. And this is what he says to them. He says, if the resurrection didn't happen, then why do I live the way that I live?

That's his argument. And that's what I want us to think about together this morning. In our passage, what you see here is Paul actually contrasts two different ways of living. He talks about a life of death and a life of drunkenness.

And we're going to consider these two to this morning. A life of death and a life of drunkenness. So here's the first one. A life of death. Have a look down at verse 30. Paul says, As for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour?

[7:15] I face death every day. Yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus, our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained?

Now throughout this entire chapter, Paul is building a case for the reality of the resurrection. And here is one of the claims he makes. If the dead are not raised, then why do I live the way that I live? Why do I give myself for this cause, for this Christian cause, over and over again? It's such big risk to myself and big risk to my life. Why do I face death every day?

Why do I die every day? I think that's the literal translation there. Why do I die every day? Now notice a couple of things to his argument here. When Paul says that he dies or he faces death, he's obviously not being literal.

So what exactly does he mean? Well, I'd ask you to imagine a picture. Imagine a mob. A huge mob of people. Thousands of people.

[8:15] All walking in one direction. All running, actually. Pretty fast. In one direction. There is something behind them. Something behind them that they want to get away from.

And there's something in front of them that they desperately want to get to. And so they're all running. And they're running with determination and purpose. Both to get away from this thing behind them and to get to this thing in front of them.

Now imagine that you're one of these people. You're in this mob and you're running along with them. Wanting to get away from what's behind and getting towards what's in front of you. But in the course of your running, you have a change of mind.

You change your mind and you come to the conviction that actually what's behind is more desirable than what's in front. And so you, on the basis of your conviction now, you turn around and you start running the other way.

What happens to you? Well, you don't have a pleasant experience, do you? You get bumped. You get bruised. You get beaten. You probably often lose your footing and get trampled on.

[9:23] Imagine doing this this morning at the start of the two oceans if you'd done this. You started about half a K in and you decided, no, you know what? The start line is more attractive to me than the finish line.

And you turn around. You'll get trampled on. People will run over you. They will step on you. You get trampled on. As Christians, that's exactly what Paul and his friends were doing in the ancient world.

They were going against this tide moving in the other direction and they were getting beaten and bruised as a result. And so he says, why on earth would I do that if the dead are not raised?

Why subject myself to this hardship if there is not something bigger causing me to turn around and go upstream? Friends, think about the very nature of Christianity.

At one fundamental level, Christianity is against the tide of the culture of this world. There's just no getting away from that. If you want to somehow belong to a religion that moves perfectly in stream with everybody else around you, Christianity is not that religion.

[10:35] The very first sermon that Jesus ever preaches that's recorded in the Gospel of Mark, is a short, short sermon, but it starts with, repent and believe the good news of the kingdom of God.

Now we like to think of that second part. Repent and believe the good news of the kingdom of God, but we forget the first part, which is repent. As in, what you've been doing your whole life, that's wrong.

Turn away from that and turn this way. That's what repentance is. The core of becoming a Christian, the core of trusting in Jesus, is to have that change of mind.

To say, I've been living in alienation from my Creator, in disobedience towards my Creator, I'm now going to live this way. You're turning the other way. Which turns you head on into the traffic of every other person who is still living this way.

There's no ways you can get away from that reality. And as soon as you turn around and you go against the traffic, you get beaten. You get bruised. You get trampled on. See, because if you're a Christian this morning, then your ultimate reality, what you believe are these things.

[11:43] You believe that God exists. You believe that God created this world, and therefore He knows how best to run this world. You believe that He created you and me and us, and so therefore He has a claim on our lives.

You believe that human beings are alienated from our Creator through sin. You believe that 2,000 years ago, He sent His Son, Jesus, to live and die, paying the price for sins.

You believe that Jesus rose from the dead, ushering in His new kingdom, that will one day He will come and He will consummate in the new heavens and the new earth. Now, believing all of those basic things, right?

Forget all the controversial stuff about Christianity. We haven't talked about biblical views of sexuality or anything like that, but just these basic Christian beliefs, that puts you at odds with multiple other views out there in the culture of what ultimate reality actually is.

Just those basic things. Which means then that if you're going to say, I'm a Christian, I'm going to firmly hold on to these basic things, you are going to get bruised and beaten a little bit.

[12:54] There is no way to get away from that. Being a Christian consistently will mean, as Paul says, dying every day.

And actually, this is not just a sort of a you against the world type of dying. It's also a you against you dying.

Notice how earnest Paul is. In the older version, it was my favorite version of the old NIV translation, the 1984 one, because I learned all my Sunday school verses and that, and then they went and changed it.

I was like, now I've got to relearn all my Sunday school verses again. But the old 1984 version, he says, I die every day. I mean that, brothers. There's an exclamation mark there. And then he talks about fighting wild beasts in Ephesus.

And it's a pretty tricky, obscure reference, because we have no record of him facing literal wild beasts in Ephesus. The fact that he was a Roman citizen probably means he was never thrown to the wild beasts in a place like the Colosseum or something like that.

[13:58] And so several commentators think that Paul is not being literal there. Rather, he's talking about the internal struggle. He's talking about the internal struggle. Everybody, everybody's against me.

Why don't I just give up? Why don't I just pack in the towel? I mean, this is so hard. I go into a town and preach the gospel. They throw stones at me. So he wrestles with himself.

He wrestles with these wild beasts inside of him. See, the type of living that the Bible calls for even goes against the tide of our own wants and our own desires. Open your Bibles and go to the Gospel of Matthew.

Read the Sermon on the Mount. Probably Jesus' most famous sermon. Three chapters that Jesus lays out a road map of what Christian living looks like, what life in the kingdom looks like.

And you read those chapters, and there's some beautiful things in those chapters, all sorts of stuff that we like to put on coffee mugs. But if you think that he's actually talking to you, and he's saying, you need to live this way, your first real response to reading those three chapters is, I can't do this.

[15:14] There is no way that I can possibly do this. You're going to feel crushed by the demands of those chapters. He says, you want to be in the kingdom, then you've got to live like this.

And you read that, and you think, look, I'm nothing like that. I'm nothing like that. I don't radically love in the way that Jesus does. I'm not radically impartial the way that Jesus is.

I'm not extravagantly generous like Jesus is. I'm not deeply compassionate like Jesus is. And even if I'm slightly good at one of those things, I'm not good at all of those things all of the time.

So you look at that, and there's this internal struggle. Wrestling with wild beasts.

How do I even live this way? Imagine the opposition I would face if I lived this way consistently.

Should I even try to live this way? It's so hard. So you're not just getting beaten and bruised and trampled on by the culture.

[16:17] You're getting beaten and bruised by yourself. But you need to understand the other side of this here. You see, Paul says, and this is his whole argument, he says, I would never do this.

I would never go upstream against the world, against myself even, continuously, if I didn't have a really, really compelling reason to do so. And then he points to his reason.

It's the resurrection. It's why I do this. It's the resurrection. Knowing and understanding the resurrection will make you want to live a life of death.

That sounds wrong, but it's right. Knowing and believing in the resurrection will make you want to live a life of death. Knowing and treasuring the resurrection and the hope that you one day will be resurrected yourself will drive you to find your ultimate reality in a different place from where the rest of the world is finding theirs.

And it's even, even if it's going to cause you to rub up against them. Even if it's going to cause you to be ridiculed. And then knowing and treasuring the resurrection will drive you to live a different way, being like Jesus, compassionate, generous, loving, impartial.

[17:34] Even if it's going to be an internal struggle for you. Even if it's going to feel impossible. The resurrection compels you to this life of death that Paul speaks about.

If it's true and your heart and your mind believe it, it is going to compel you to this life of death.

Death to what the world wants for you. And death even to what you want for you.

That's what Paul means by living a life of death. Facing death every single day. Now he contrasts this to another lifestyle. A life of drunkenness.

So here's the second point. Look at the second half of verse 32. He says, If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

Do not be misled. Bad company corrupts good character. Come back to your senses as you ought and stop sinning, for there are some who are ignorant of God, and I say this to your shame.

[18:40] So if the dead are not raised, well then just live for now. Just live for now. The quote there that the Apostle Paul uses comes from the Old Testament. It comes from the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 22, which depicts actually a time in Israel's history when they were about to get slaughtered by the Assyrians.

And so you can imagine the soldiers there sitting on the wall, looking down at this horde of Assyrians coming to them.

And one of them turns to the other guys and he says, Guys, let's eat, drink, and be merry, because tomorrow we certainly are going to die. But there's actually even a cultural backdrop against which Paul's quoting Isaiah here.

So there are several commentators who've looked at this verse and pointed out that Paul is probably referencing Isaiah here in part today, take a bit of a dig at a way of thinking that was very prevalent in Corinth at the time.

And that is Epicurean philosophy. So Epicurean philosophy was started by a guy named Epicurus, about 307 BC. It's a form of hedonism. That is, it's a form of pleasure seeking.

[19:49] But when you think of it, I don't want you to think of just kind of like wild, rampant kids at a party on a Friday night sort of hedonism. I want you to think of kind of measured, restrained hedonism.

Pursuit of pleasure that is intellectual pleasure, peaceful pleasure, which is preferred over a sort of sensual pleasure in this way of thinking. A state of tranquility is regarded as almost the highest form of being, which is why some people have sometimes said, well, it sounds a lot like some forms of Buddhism, actually.

Now, the reason why Paul would have an axe to grind with the Epicureans is their rather detailed doctrine of death. They essentially believed that upon death, your body and your mind are annihilated.

That is, they cease to exist completely. They go out of existence. Fairly similar to what a lot of kind of modern secular materialists, atheists would believe today, that there's just nothing when you die.

For Epicurus, he reasoned that fear of death is really the biggest inhibitor to pleasure in this life.

That if you can make it go away, you're going to have more pleasure.

[20:55] So he would say something like this. He would say, the reason you don't experience bliss or that heightened joy that you should be experiencing is because you're afraid of dying. And at that point, I think him and Paul would probably agree.

I would agree and say, yeah, it's probably right. Fear of death does stifle joy. So what Epicurus does is he tries to take fear of death away with this particular view of annihilation.

And that's where him and Paul in the Bible go in separate directions. Now, you might sit and think, well, how does annihilation take away fear of death? Here's his logic. I think I might've shared this once before with you, but I wrote it down again just because it's complicated and you've got to follow it.

This is how philosophers speak. This is why I'm not a philosopher because I can't keep track of so many different points. But this is Epicurus' logic. This is how annihilationism takes away your fear of death. Point one, follow carefully, class.

Death is annihilation. Point two, the living have not yet been annihilated, otherwise they wouldn't be alive. Pretty standard.

[22:04] Point three, death does not affect the living, derived from point one and two. Point four, so death is not bad for the living, derived from point three. Point five, for something to be bad for somebody, that person has to exist at least.

Point six, the dead do not exist, from point one. Point seven, therefore death is not bad for the dead, derived from points five and six. Point eight, therefore death is bad for neither the living nor the dead, derived from points four and seven.

Make sense? Got it down? Here's a better way to understand it. This comes from the Roman poet Lucretius. He put it this way, and he said, think about before you were born.

Holding that? Think about before you were born. Was it a bad experience? No? Then why should you fear annihilation? Now, if that is your ultimate reality of the world, then you must vest yourself in the pursuit of pleasure here and now, while you still exist.

Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. That's the sort of attitude that Paul is talking about when he talks about the bad company in verse 33. And here's his pretty stinging rebuke that comes in verse 34.

[23:25] He says, come back to your senses as you ought and stop sinning. In the original, it's actually literally, come out of your drunken stupor, he says. Come out of your drunken stupor.

Sober up to the reality of this world. Stop intoxicating yourself on something that in the end doesn't really make sense of ultimate reality. You see, in a world where ultimate reality doesn't include the resurrection, the only thing that you are left with is drunken stupor.

That's all you have. All you can really do is intoxicate yourself with something to make you forget about the fear of death. You can intoxicate yourself with pleasure, with intellectual pursuits, with relationships, with philanthropy, with religion, with any number of other philosophies, but you have to intoxicate yourself with something lest you sober up and realize that death, regardless of all sorts of sophisticated philosophical gymnastics, is actually really still this terrible shadow hanging over every single one of us.

Now, you can look at all of this and what we've spoken about now and you can say, well, gee, thanks, Stephen. You've left us between a rock and a hard place here because the two options that you presented, they aren't like amazing.

Option one, a life of struggle, one that Paul calls dying daily. It doesn't sound very appealing. It's not great marketing. Option two, intoxicate ourselves with something else so that we really forget about the shadow of death that hangs over our lives.

[25:02] In fact, the second option, it sounds a little bit better because at least we get some joy now then. Intoxicate yourselves now. Live in ignorance now even if it's a false reality, even if it's not really true.

Some of you might remember back if you've got long memories to that really revolutionary, mind-altering movie called The Matrix. I mean, it's basically, it's on the Classics channel nowadays, but it was pretty hip and out there at the time when it came up.

But in The Matrix, you've got these people who are all plugged into this machine. And so the reality they experience is not a real reality, but there's a group who've broken out and they're trying to help other people come alive to the fact that they're in this false reality.

And you have this one character and his name is Cypher. He's one of the good guys at first. He's part of Morpheus' gang, the good guys who've broken out. And they're fighting against the bad guys, Agent Smith being the typical bad guy.

Cypher goes over to the other side and he's in a restaurant and he's meeting with Agent Smith. And Agent Smith, now they're in this false reality now where they're meeting. Agent Smith says to Cypher, why do you want to go back in to The Matrix?

[26:16] Why do you want to forget about the real reality and just go back into The Matrix and abandon your friends who are trying to pull everybody out of this false reality? And they're having dinner there and he cuts a piece of juicy steak and he eats it and he savors it and he says, because ignorance is bliss.

Now that's really the second option. Live in a kind of false reality, but at least it tastes good. Why choose a life of death over that?

Well, here's why. On the eve of Jesus' crucifixion, he says the following words in John chapter 12. He says, You see, the basic principle across the New Testament is that life, real life, is only ever attained by passing through the shadow of death.

That's how you get it. You only get real life by passing through the shadow of death. The only way you actually get to live is by dying. The way to experience real life is to die to yourself, to die to your

wants, to die to your desires, the pressures and the persuasions of this world and to follow the persuasion of the one who died for you.

Follow the one who's already gone, actually, through the shadow of death and has come out the other side. You know why I don't buy that Epicurean logic? Even though it seems to make sense, logically.

[28:17] But you know why I don't buy it? When he says, think back to before you were born, was it a bad experience? Well, then death is not a bad experience. You know how I respond when I hear that?

I think hogwash. Absolute hogwash. It's not the same. Here's one of the reasons I know it's not the same. I have children. One of the best things about being a parent, especially when they're quite small, is checking in on them when they're sleeping.

The sort of quiet moments in the night you go into the bedroom and you look down on these beautiful children and I think about sort of the unbelievable joy of the last few years of having them, being in relationship with them, and something happens in that moment as a parent.

Your heart just sort of melts over, over this child. And so if I then, even for a second, entertain the thought of death breaking into that relationship, either one of them dying or I myself dying, it fills me in that moment, in the present, with gut-wrenching horror.

a sense of dread like nothing else does. You see, it's pretty cold comfort to point back to the billions of years that I was dead before now.

[29:43] Because all of that is irrelevant once you have actually tasted life, once you have actually been awake, once you taste joy, once you taste love, once you taste comfort and excitement and success, then it doesn't matter how many billions of years you've been in blissful sleep for, nothing, absolutely nothing is worse than losing all of that good.

the shadow of death is horrifying. In fact, it is so horrifying that it took a moment of gut-wrenching horror to get rid of it.

The very author of life himself subjecting himself to a gruesome and bloody death. Jesus removes the shadow of death that hangs over us by he himself dying.

And because he died and because he didn't stay dead, because he rose again, our earthly death is actually nothing but a shadow for us. It has no substance.

It has been killed once and for all. For the Christian, there is no fear of death because Christ has already faced death and he has conquered it in his resurrection. That's the whole point of the resurrection.

[31:03] And when there's no fear of death, when you're not afraid of death, well then you are enabled and you are empowered to die.

To die to your own wants, to die to your own desires, and to pursue bigger, greater wants and desires. The wants and the desires of our crucified yet resurrected Lord.

you're enabled to that. You're enabled to die to the pressures and the persuasions of the kingdom of this world and instead give yourself to the pressure and the persuasion of the kingdom of Christ. Friends, right now, because of the fear of death, you, you want too little in life. Your aspirations are too low. In fact, in the grand scheme of things, it's not too much to say that our aspirations are pretty pathetic.

I've always been arrested by the way C.S. Lewis spoke about this. He said this, he said, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

[32:28] We are far too easily pleased. If you can shake the fear of death by believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then you will be able to want so much more, desire and want so much more, something so much bigger, and that is life and life eternal.

You'll be intoxicated then with something so much more grand, so much more powerful than anything that this earthly life has to offer you.

And so Paul is really shouting at us from this passage. He really is. If it was an audio he'd be shouting at this point. Sober up he's saying. Sober up. See ultimate reality for what it actually is.

The reason that I live the way that I live, the reason that I die daily, the reason that I wrestle against my own wants and my own desires, the reason I do all of this is because I'm actually sober. I'm sober to the reality that the Son of God was crucified on a Roman cross but that three days later he rose from the grave and he is now alive and he has beaten death and now death is just a shadow for you and me.

[33:39] It is not real. Sober up to that reality. And so friends I ask you this morning, have you died and risen with Christ?

Are you intoxicated with his love and the hope that his resurrection body brings you? Are you intoxicated to the point that you are prepared to die in the now to the pressures of this world and to the sinful desires of your own heart?

Let me close with these words that capture it again from the Valley of Vision collection of prayers. O Lord, I marvel that thou shouldst become incarnate, be crucified, dead, and buried.

The sepulchre calls forth my adoring wonder for it is empty and thou art risen. The fourfold gospel attests it, the living witnesses prove it, my heart's experience knows it.

Give me to die with thee that I may rise to new life. for I wish to be as dead and buried to sin, to selfishness, to the world that I might not hear the voice of the charmer and might be delivered from his lusts.

[35:02] Let me reckon my old life dead because of crucifixion and never feed it as a living thing. Help me to be a holy, happy person. Free from every wrong desire, from everything contrary to thy mind, grant me more and more of the resurrection life.

May it rule me. May I walk in its power and be strengthened through its influence. May that be the prayer of every heart this morning.

Let's pray now. Our gracious God, we have one very simple prayer this morning and it is that you would allow us, each one of us experientially, to take hold of the resurrection.

That by your spirit you would give us eyes to truly see what has been done for us. And that we would cling to it.

Because if we're able to do that, if you're able to do that in us, well then everything changes. Death becomes a shadow.

[36:17] It loses its substance. And we are empowered and emboldened to live your ways in all circumstances. So won't you grant us the special mercy this morning, Lord?

And I pray for any person who's maybe sitting here who has never repented of their sin, died with Christ and been raised to new life by placing their faith in Jesus.

Won't you bring them to faith this morning? Won't you help them see that they're not actually a Christian and they need to become a Christian so that they can participate in this resurrection life? Have that mercy upon them, we pray. We ask this all for Christ's sake and his glory. Amen.