

Heaven Is Our Home

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[0 : 00] Well I was just in town last night picking up last few bits and pieces before Hogmanay and I discovered that in the co-op on the seasonal aisle half of it is still Christmas and half of it has got Easter eggs already.

We haven't even reached 2024 yet but already it's Easter. If you're like me you might find that kind of thing slightly distasteful. Let's at least let Christmas die down before we move on and yet this morning I'm guilty as well because you may have noticed the reading we had earlier.

Really it's all about Easter. It was a very wise man who once said that Christmas is important but Easter is absolutely crucial.

I don't know if anyone knows who said that. Thomas do you know who said that? It was Arson Wenger, the former Arsenal manager. Now he meant the fixtures in Arsenal season were more important than Easter than a Christmas but that line, Christmas is important but Easter is absolutely crucial.

Unwittingly Wenger was on to something. Something really true that lies at the heart of our Christian faith. We've just spent a lot of time celebrating Jesus' birth.

[1 : 12] It's a wonderful, a marvelous thing that the infinite God of the universe takes on frail and finite human flesh. Comes down as a baby, laden and manger, that's a wonderful, wonderful thing.

But as we look now towards a new year of serving our Lord together we see that it is the resurrection of Jesus, the fact of his resurrection that allows us to face this new year, face the future entirely with real and certain and life-giving hope.

Throughout the letter of 2 Corinthians and in particular in this section Paul is defending his ministry from the accusation that he's just weak old, insignificant Paul.

He's not impressive enough, he's not cool enough, he's not flashy enough. And Paul is really happy to hold his hands up and say, yeah, yeah I'm very weak actually.

My ministry is marked by a lot of weakness, a lot of suffering. It does not look impressive in the eyes of the world. But even as he repeatedly acknowledges that, he will never allow the accusation that his ministry is pointless because his is the ministry of resurrection.

[2 : 36] It is centred on the hope of the real, full and bodily resurrection of Jesus. Not as a hope which distians him in his many sufferings, in his many persecutions.

A ministry which he describes elsewhere as being handed over to death every single day. Jesus' resurrection allows him to keep going. And it's through Paul's example that we see that real resurrection hope allows every believer to keep going in a life of serving and pleasing God.

So that's our big game this morning. Our big game is as we look at the resurrection and what that means for us is that we are allowed and able to keep going in serving and pleasing God with our whole lives.

This passage can be summed up in the line, for Paul, heaven is our home, so take heart, have courage and aim to please.

Heaven is our home, so take heart, have courage and aim to please. And these are the three points under which I want us to just spend a bit of time looking at these verses together. So first of all, heaven is our home, so take heart.

[3 : 51] I don't know how many people in here love camping. I know that Thomas for some reason loves camping. I don't. Maybe you're the kind of person who loves nothing more than spending a night under a canvas, maybe like me, you've got the common sense to book a hotel, but even if you're the most diehard camping enthusiast, when you live here especially, you must acknowledge that a house is better than a tent.

It takes someone really weird to experience the winds of yesterday and think, oh, I think I'd quite like to be in a tent actually. Now houses are quite good. Tents are just temporary.

And that's why in verse one of our passage, the image of a tent is a really fitting one for Paul's confidence and hope even in the face of death.

Verse one he says, for we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens.

He's using the imagery of tents and houses, but really what he's doing is drawing a contrast between his earthly body on the one hand and his resurrection body that awaits him.

[5 : 01] Now our earthly bodies, they're a bit like tents. They do the job. We're thankful to have them, but ultimately they are temporary. Whereas on the other hand our resurrection bodies, they are eternal.

They are kept safe in the heavens. They are built by hands, not human hands, but crafted by God himself.

So Paul knows that for him as he faces the very real possibility of even death itself in his ministry, well he has a certain hope that can keep him going.

Absolute worst thing they can do to me says Paul is kill me. But even if they do, well I know my future is secure. I'll be moving from a tent to a house not made by hands.

That is certain hope. Then he builds on this image of the tent though. In verses two to four you might notice there's a slight change in tone and emphases. Verse two, for in this tent we groan longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.

[6 : 09] If indeed by putting it on we may not find to be naked. For while we are still in this tent we groan being burdened. Not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed.

So that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Paul points out here that tent life is marked by groaning and anytime I've spent the night in a tent I certainly groan a lot.

But this groaning, this longing, this sense of being burdened, well Paul has in mind here for himself. It's the harsh reality of his life in ministry.

He's probably thinking of the sum total of all of the afflictions that his authentic gospel ministry brings. And if you know Paul's story you will know that they were many.

This is a man who was facing fierce opposition, who was feeling deep, deep anxiety for all of the churches that he's caring for and even an acute awareness of his deep physical frailty.

[7 : 15] Paul knows that tent life, life in mortal bodies is not always easy. And actually everyone around him in his day knew that as well, just as we do.

And in this first century Greek or Roman world the common thing to do as people acknowledge the frailties, the finiteness of human bodies, the popular idea was well one day we're not going to have bodies at all.

We're all moving towards this disembodied spirit life where we will be set free from the prison of our mortal bodies.

That's what the world around Paul is saying. So it's interesting that Paul, he doesn't groan, he doesn't long to be unclothed but further clothed.

In other words, not to be totally disembodied and become like a ghost or the force in Star Wars but to become further clothed, to inhabit a resurrection body that is somehow even more real and physical and tangible than his earthly body.

[8 : 26] That is the hope that sustains Paul. Completely distinct from the world around him. His hope is earthly, it is real, it is physical and it is tangible.

All of these verses come under the heading of the slightly earlier verse we didn't read but 2 Corinthians 4:16 Paul says we do not lose heart and that's his big heading for everything that we read this morning.

That's true for Paul, he doesn't lose heart and it can be true for us too. When we grasp exactly what he's saying here.

That Christian hope, a life of trusting in Jesus, in his life and death and resurrection, that is not pie in the sky when you die. It is not we are all going to become one with the universe and escape our imprisoned mortal bodies.

No, no, Christian hope is real, it is earthly, so real you could almost reach out and touch it.

[9 : 36] There's lots to encourage us, even as we groan or sometimes even moan as we experience the struggles and strains of living in our earthly tent bodies.

I think we all probably to some extent have an idea of how inglorious and imperfect our bodies are, how they fall apart, how they let us down, especially as we get older.

I turned 30 during lockdown a couple of years ago and I was out for my daily walk that we were allowed to do and bumped into a friend from church who had gone on that journey of turning 30 a few years before me and he said, ah, you know, from tomorrow everything's going to hurt and it's not going to stop hurting and he was right.

I don't know why everything hurts but it does. That's just the reality of being in my 30s. I don't imagine that's going to get any better as I get older. But the reality of the new creation, the reality of resurrection bodies which await all of those who trust in Christ, that is a reality which ought to lift our hearts and draw our minds and our longings and our groanings towards these things.

Not moaning in despair that our knees don't bend quite like they used to but groaning, groaning in delighted anticipation of the day that is coming when we will inhabit resurrected bodies completely free from imperfection, completely free from pain.

[11:17] Now that's a wonderful truth in isolation but of course all the Paul is groaning for here. That's not limited to the realities of old age or physical pain.

Paul's anticipated groaning, that comes from a position of the hardship of genuine but weak looking gospel ministry.

And so as well as the wonderful reality of inhabiting a body free from pain for Paul and for us there's a glimpse here of just how glorious and eternal, genuine and authentic gospel ministry really, really is.

Thomas was helpfully reminding us all earlier what the church is for, how we are beacons, how we are signals to the world of real and life changing hope. Let me ask you though, does it feel like that's the case?

Does it feel like we've got the absolute best news ever and everyone's lives will be completely turned around if they only heard it? Sometimes it does. When you've got over a hundred people coming to your carol service and you're putting out extra chairs you might think, yes, this is what it's meant to be like all the time, people coming and hearing, we've got something to share, this is brilliant.

[12:41] And it's halfway through a bleak and dreary and windy January and you're putting your coat on to come out to the prayer meeting and your family think you're absolutely bonkers for doing it.

Maybe it doesn't feel quite so earth shattering a ministry to be a part of that. The reality of a life of living for Jesus, of making him known, often will look pretty weak, will feel very insignificant, we will have moments where we think, what on earth am I doing?

This just seems like nonsense. But in those moments, just like Paul, we need to remember that we know the future.

And the future for those who trust in Christ is one of glorious resurrection bodies. That helps Paul to not lose heart. That helps us to not lose heart when gospel ministry feels weak and feels embarrassing.

In church life, we are not self-help gurus, we're not helping people to stick to their New Year's resolutions or improve the quality of their lives. We are seeking to build for eternity by drawing people into a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens.

[14:04] That is what we are doing. It will look weak, but it is of huge and eternal significance.

God helps us to not lose heart, helps us to take heart in those moments of weakness. And that leads us also to our second heading this morning. Heaven is our home, so have courage.

And if we look at verses 6 to 8, we notice a shift in focus again because Paul moves from talking about the physical struggles of life in earthly bodies to the relational distance from God that tent life brings with it.

He writes verse 6, so we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage. And we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. I don't know if you can still hear the traces of a Northern Irish accent in my voice, but my family will still stay over in Northern Ireland.

[15:11] That means that Billy loves to FaceTime with his nanny and granda over there. And they are always delighted to hear from him. But my mum will always say the same thing, I wish I could just reach into that screen and give you a big cuddle.

Of course that's how she feels because video calls are great, but cuddles are even better. Being together for real, that's the best thing. Well, in a very similar way, Paul is saying tent life is great. A life of living for Jesus is one of great joys. The life of faith is a wonderful life, but the best is yet to come.

For Paul, knowing Christ does mean a life-giving joy and peace at all times, but what he's saying in these verses is that life in our earthly bodies is one of walking by faith, but his longing is that for the day when he will walk by sight as he comes face to face with the Lord whom he loves.

There are many joys and blessings along the way, of course there are, but lasting joy and true blessing come for Paul when he can go home to be with the Lord, to see in full what he nigh only sees in part.

[16 : 33] And in that sense, he is able once again to stare at that very real possibility of death in the face and remain of good courage.

I mentioned earlier, it is easy to groan and moan about the fact that our bodies age and decay, but we also know really that death is no laughing matter.

Reminded here though, that the reality of facing death is entirely different for the Christian. Paul's assertion here, we are always of good courage.

This is a hinge statement. It looks backwards and it looks forward. So even the realities of verses one to five, the realities of groaning and of earthly bodies destined for decay and the very real pain of death and loss, well even in the midst of them the believer can look forward to the reality of verses six to eight, the reality of going home to be with the Lord.

It's twice in the last month that I had to begin our services in Dingwall by saying it's with great sadness that I announce and you can fill in the rest.

[17 : 45] Two dearly beloved members of our church family who have gone home to be with the Lord and that's truly comforting. A few weeks ago when I last saw one of these dear departed sisters, I was visiting her in hospital and she said, I can't wait to go home.

She didn't mean her house. She was ready to go and be with her Lord. And that's where she is now. It is really, really sad when people die, when Christian believers die.

It's right that we grieve and mourn but we do so with real and tangible hope. The Bible doesn't downplay or ignore the hard reality of death but even in the midst of real pain and suffering and sorrow is a source of hope that is so tangible that it gives us courage which is even greater than our sorrows.

And let me just say, if you're with us this morning as someone who wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, doesn't yet know Jesus as your own Savior and Lord, let me say this is the hope that is on offer for you.

It's not just for your parents. It's not just for the people around you who you think are worthy of it. It is for you and it is real if you will just reach out in faith and say to Jesus, be my Lord, forgive me my sins, give me this hope, he would be delighted to answer that prayer.

[19 : 19] For those of us though who do know and love Jesus, those who are following him with all of our lives, well within the context of authentic gospel ministry that Paul is defending here, this gives us great calls for real courage in proclaiming Jesus.

It sometimes feels like we've got nothing to offer the world around us. It feels like they've got all of the answers to the great philosophical or intellectual questions about Christianity.

I know people from my university days who are much more intelligent and articulate than I will ever be and I can feel like I've got nothing to say to them that they haven't heard before.

But I find that when it comes to the questions of suffering and death, all of a sudden the world has little to say and no real comfort to offer.

We might be familiar with the words of Christopher Hitchens, the famous atheist writer when he was facing the prospect of his own terminal illness. He wrote these words to the dumb question, why me, the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply, why not?

[20 : 35] That's one view of death from the world around us. Other people like to speak in euphemisms and metaphors about moving into the next room or going to be at one with the cosmos.

We have something so much better to offer, so much more real, real hope rooted in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

I remember meeting one young guy who came to faith in his 20s, his sister had been a Christian, she had died a few years beforehand and she'd gone from being a really active, sporty young woman to being confined to a wheelchair.

She had a stroke and after paralyzed all the way down one side of her body and he was furious about this, he was furious that she was still trusting in Jesus in spite of all that had happened to her and he said, how on earth can you still believe all that nonsense?

Look at everything your God has taken from you. She said, when I see Jesus, I'll run to him. That's the hope that we have and we can take great courage in sharing the gospel, knowing that it's message of real resurrection hope.

[21 : 52] That is a message which so many desperately, desperately need to hear. The world has got nothing, nothing to say, nothing to offer in the face of the reality of pain and suffering and death.

The gospel does. The gospel says God knows, God cares and God wins. That gives us real hope. Gives us real hope to proclaim and it gives us real hope to share with one another within church life as we speak the same gospel truths to each other.

Again within church life when someone's going through a horrible time, we can feel that we've got nothing to say. I feel like that all the time, getting the phone call going out with my Bible in my hand and thinking, Lord I've got nothing.

His word has everything as we have the privilege of sharing these timeless, these eternal truths with one another, truths with comfort and sustain and give real hope even as we go through our very worst.

[23 : 02] So that's the reality of our future, a future face to face with God and it's one that gives us courage and it is also one which should transform all of our aims in life as Paul goes on to say and that's our final point.

Heaven is our home so aim to please and that's what Paul himself does in verse 9 whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

These really deep and timeless truths, they don't just provide comfort for Paul, they're not like some kind of safety blanket, they also really practically shape his priorities of how he lives his life every day.

Whatever his state as he says in verse 9 whatever state he's in his aim is always to please the Lord whom he loves.

It's here though in these last couple of verses that we notice there's another dimension to the future which awaits Paul, the one that's sustaining him, the one that's shaping his priorities.

[24 : 11] It is the future reality of final day judgment. Now that can be an uncomfortable thing for us to think about and sometimes we tend to think the idea of final day judgment, that's just for those who don't trust in Jesus, who rejected him, but here we find Paul saying verse 10 for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body whether good or evil.

Now Paul is absolutely not saying that some people will be saved on this last day judgment based on what they have done and he's also not saying that Christians in the final day judgment could lose their salvation based on what they've done in service of the Lord.

If he was saying that nobody could be of good courage as he's just been talking about. What he is saying really clearly though is that all of us, everyone who trusts in Christ will give an account on the last day.

We will stand before our Lord and we will give an account for all that we have done to serve him in the here and now.

And so our very real and unshakable confidence that we must have based on everything we've just been hearing about. The confidence of being with the Lord in eternity that should go hand in hand with a reverent and fearful desire to live to please God here on earth.

[25 : 49] That's what the Bible says time and again, it doesn't draw any contradiction between those two things. That's certainly how it works for Paul.

Heaven is my home. Resurrection body is my future and so I will do everything I can to live to please God knowing that I will give account to him on that last day.

The reality that he will give that account to the very one who has guaranteed his resurrection hope. That drives Paul to want to invite God's pleasure and reward on the last day to drive us to.

The question we should be asking ourselves as we embark on another new year of serving our Lord together is not about New Year's resolutions, about chocolates and dieting or whatever else. It is the question, what is my central aim in all of life? What am I in it for?

[26 : 54] If our central aim is to please people or to earn worldly comfort, we will quickly find that our enthusiasm for authentic gospel ministry will dry up because it just takes a couple of knockbacks in our personal sharing of the gospel or the feeling of being ostracized by friends and colleagues or one major falling out or disagreement with someone in church life or comparisons with other churches down the road or our own church in the past and how good it used to be or one painful experience of seeing somebody we've invested time and energy and emotions into walking away from the Lord, any one of these things if our aim is worldly comfort will be enough to completely choke out our desire to live for Jesus.

If our central aim though is to please God, to serve the Lord that we love, to invite His pleasure at the final judgment and therefore to fearfully, reverently serve Him in all of this life, that is the only aim, the only central motivation that will sustain us and keep us going when life is hard and when Christian ministry does feel weak.

That is the driving aim which will help us going and help us to keep loving people in spite of what our feelings might dictate, to keep loving them generously, sacrificially, to keep faithfully plodding on and trying to build up and care for God's people even if that means discouragement and hurt and pain, to keep going in knowing that the simple act of speaking the truth in love to build up Christian brothers and sisters are works of eternal value no matter how weak we may feel in doing them, no matter how big or small our congregation may be.

The main thing for Paul lasting to notice in this passage, the obvious outbox for him is that he seeks to persuade others.

That's in verse 11, just going into the bit that we're not actually looking at but Thomas Redford's earlier verse 11, therefore knowing the fear of the Lord we persuade others.

[29 : 39] Paul makes it his life's ambition to share the gospel and persuade as many people of the Lordship of Jesus as he possibly can.

Now we can't convince anyone into the faith, of course it's all the Lord's doing but our central aim ought to be pleasing God and if you want to be like Paul that will mean making a real priority of trying to pursue, trying to share the gospel with others.

We will stop doing that if our aims are worldly, if our aims are selfish because we will be discouraged, we will be knocked back, people will get angry, people will get angry, people will laugh at us.

If our aim is to please God though, if our aim is to invite the pleasure of the Lord Jesus, well we can face any one of those hard realities and take heart and keep going with courage and keep going knowing that it is the Lord and not ourselves that we are pleasing.

We went through 2 Corinthians in St Andrews where I trained a couple of years ago and at the time I was talking to one friend about it. She said that she usually likes to read the end of a book when she gets it.

[30 : 57] I think that's quite sacrilegious actually as an English-League graduate. She goes to the end of a novel so she knows how it ends and then she can read it full of comfort knowing that there's no surprises in store.

And she said it usually really winds me up that I can't do that in life. I know it's happening at the end of a novel, don't know what's coming for me in life. But 2 Corinthians has really helped me to remember that I do know how the story ends.

It's such a helpful way of putting it friends, we know how the story ends. We know that for those who trust in the Lord Jesus the story ends in eternal resurrection life and so we don't lose heart. We know that the story ends with our giving account to our Lord and so we reverently, fearfully aim to please Him and glorify Him with all of our lives knowing that the earthy reward is non-existent but that one day we will receive our reward in full when we stand before Him and through faith by God's grace He says to us, well done, good and faithful servant.

That is the aim we must keep sensual. That is the hope which will sustain us throughout this year and as many years as God gives us walking with and serving Him here on this earth.

[32 : 29] Let me lead us in prayer then as we close.