

THE LAST TRUMPET

1 Corinthians 15: 42-58

In 1789 Benjamin Franklin wrote “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”. Now, I’m sure he was joking, but in any event he was certainly mistaken. Greeks and Italians evade taxes, residents of Monaco don’t have to pay them and if Christ returns before we die, then we won’t have to suffer death – as we saw in our reading.

Anyway, even if we do suffer death in this life, it’s not the end of the story, because death is conquered. Christ has conquered death once and for all, once for all, through his atoning death on the cross and his resurrection. At his resurrection Christ was raised up into a physical body which bore a significant resemblance to his former body. Paul talks about this in verses 1-11 of chapter 15 of his letter to the Corinthians. But, apparently the Corinthian church had been questioning the reality of the resurrection of the dead – look at verses 12 and 13:

“But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.” (1Corinthians 15:12-13 NIV)

and as Paul goes on to say, if the resurrection of Christ were not a reality then our whole Christian faith would be useless and we would be false witnesses – look at verses 14 and 15:

“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised.” (1Corinthians 15:14-15 NIV).

Of course, Christ WAS raised from the dead as Paul affirms – look at verse 20:

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1Corinthians 15:20 NIV).

So Paul tells us that the resurrection of the dead is an absolute necessity if there is to be any Christian faith at all. If we reject that, then we are denying Christ's death as a saving event. That means we're also denying the forgiveness of our sins, our hope for the future, Christian ethics, and indeed the character of God himself. Now, the Corinthian's problems with the idea of resurrection may have partly come from a view of the material world as inherently evil – based on Greek philosophy – but they also probably had problems with the idea of the re-animation of corpses and the resuscitation of dead bodies that had rotted away. They believed the nature of physical bodies was essentially to decay, look at verse 35:

“But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?"” (1Corinthians 15:35 NIV)

but, why would anyone who acknowledges a creator God, think that His restoring bodies – in whatever way – would be more difficult for Him than making them in the first place.

Anyway, Paul was convinced that Christ's resurrection was not the resuscitation of a corpse, but the transformation of his former body into a glorified body – still a physical body, but transformed into a powerful and glorious body which is no longer subject to decay. Scripture tells us that Christ was certainly resurrected into a real physical body, you may remember that he ate fish with the disciples, as Luke tells us (Luke 24:42-43).

In verses 36-38 Paul uses the idea of seeds to teach that our resurrection bodies will have continuity with our present bodies, but he says that we will also be transformed just as a seed springs up to new, different and vigorous life – see verses 39 and 40:

“All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another.” (1Corinthians 15:39-40 NIV)

our new bodies will still look somewhat like our old bodies, alike enough to be recognisably ourselves – after all Jesus was able to be recognised, although with a little difficulty – but our new bodies will

also be as different from our present bodies as a bright shining star is from a cold planet.

So, having spent a few moments looking at the background to our text for today, we see that Paul continues to teach the Corinthians about the nature of the resurrection bodies they're going to receive – see verses 42 to 44:

“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” (1Corinthians 15:42-44 NIV)

Here Paul keeps the analogy of the seed, again emphasising continuity. He says that our existing bodies are perishable, they will decay through age and disease, but in verse 42 he introduces the new and key idea of “imperishable”. The Corinthians well knew that their present bodies were subject to disease and decay, which was partly why they were disenchanted with them. Paul is telling them that what they have failed to grasp is the importance of the transformation God will bring about – the new bodies will not age or decay, they will be imperishable. It is fundamental to Paul's thought that the after-life will be infinitely more glorious than this life. In verses 43 and 44 Paul subtly counters the Corinthians low view of the material world by twice linking the word ‘spiritual’ with the word ‘body’ – bringing together the material and the heavenly. The new body is ‘spiritual’ not in the sense of ‘immaterial’, but in the sense of ‘supernatural’ or ‘heavenly’.

So our resurrection bodies won't be composed of ‘spirit’, they won't be immaterial. Rather they will be real physical bodies adapted to our new existence. God has arranged things so that there are different kinds of bodies adapted to our different existences. Returning to the analogy of the seed, the same “life” will live in two different “bodies.” But, we can't take that analogy too far because the seed and the full stalk with grain have only their life in common. In the case of the resurrection body, there is genuine continuity between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies. Paul emphasises this point by

using the same noun “body” to describe both the present and the future.

So Paul prepares the way for his next analogy, that of Adam and Christ, because his whole argument about resurrection bodies is based on the resurrection of Christ – look at verses 45 – 49:

“So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” (1Corinthians 15:45-49 NIV)

the first Adam is, of course, the first man created by God in Genesis Chapter 1, whilst the last Adam is Christ. The first Adam stamped his characteristics on us because of his sin. In the same way, Christ, as the last Adam, the first of the new race of spiritual people, now stamps his character on us. There is finality in this, there will be no further head of the human race. We need to become Christ like in order to enter into eternal life.

Here Paul is really referring back to verses 21 and 22:

“For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22 NIV)

Paul’s argument is really that just as the resurrection of Christ is the ground of our resurrection (vv. 1–11, 20–28), so it is the ground of the resurrection body. He’s also saying that Adam is a creation of the earth (having been made out of dust as we know from Genesis 2:7), whilst Christ, because of his resurrection and ascension, is of heaven. All believers, as humans, share the existence of the first Adam and we’re being called to bear the image of and to share the existence of the last Adam, Christ. This will involve bearing a body like Christ’s resurrection body. I believe verse 49 also calls to the Corinthians - and us - to be like Christ, to bear his likeness, not his physical likeness but his spiritual likeness, now, today. But, as we are about to see in the coming verses, that will not be fully realized in this life.

Having argued for the certainty of an imperishable resurrection body on the basis of Christ's bodily resurrection, Paul now tells us that this transformation of our bodies is absolutely necessary for us to enter into heavenly existence – see verse 50:

“I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” (1Corinthians 15:50 NIV)

and he goes on to tell us that this transformation will happen instantaneously at the second coming of Christ – look at verses 51-53: “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” (1Corinthians 15:51-53 NIV)

Here I think Paul is revealing part of the special revelation he received from Christ on the road to Damascus. The trumpet announces a moment of radical change. The emphasis is not so much on resurrection, but on the change of transformation. Paul tells us that our transformed bodies will be imperishable and immortal and he also tells us that this will happen to both the living and the dead instantaneously, in the time it takes us to blink an eyelid, at the second coming. Our new bodies will be immeasurably more powerful and effective than our present bodies. This will be the ultimate makeover. If your body isn't sound now, or perhaps if it has never been sound, take heart. Paul tells us that our new bodies will be completely sound – for ever – glorious, imperishable and immortal. I met a paralysed Joni Eareckson Tada at Amsterdam 2000 and she says “Somewhere in my paralysed broken body is the seed of what I shall become. The paralysis makes what I am to become all the more grand The image I'll see [in heaven] will be unmistakably Joni, although a much better brighter Joni.” The trumpets in verse 52 are a sign of the end times and are always linked to victory and triumph. As John Stott says “death will be a trivial episode a transition to the fullness of life.”

All this must have come as something of a shock to the Corinthians, given that they were repelled by the idea of a physical rather than a purely non-material eternity. With the second coming of Christ everything changes, we are still in our bodies, but in bodies which have been transformed into an imperishable and immortal form – fit for us to be with God for all eternity. The long chain of disease, decay and death brought in by the rebellion of the first Adam and the Fall, has been finally broken for ever by the last Adam, Christ. Our text doesn't tell us what will happen to those who experience death prior to the second coming in the intervening time between their death and that second coming, but I believe we will exist in an intermediate spiritual state in the presence of the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ as Paul implies in 2 Corinthians 5:8 (see also Revelation 6:9-11). In any event, as we've seen, we are fully assured of our final bodily resurrection.

Paul then tells us that this will be the final defeat of death – see verses 54:55:

“When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"” (1Corinthians 15:54-55 NIV)

Paul never likes to miss the opportunity for an exhortation and he triumphantly concludes his argument about resurrection bodies on the high note of Christ's present victory over sin and the law as well – see verses 56 and 57:

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1Corinthians 15:56-57 NIV)

Moral issues are the serious ones. It's not death in the physical sense which matters, but the death which is the wages of sin. But, Christ has secured the forgiveness of our sins, and where sin is pardoned – as it is for all true believers – and that's the great BUT of verse 57 – death has no consequences. Where sin is pardoned, death has no sting. We no longer need to fear death.

This leads to a concluding exhortation to the Corinthians and all believers to work in the context of hope – see verse 58:

“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.” (1Corinthians 15:58 NIV).

This idea of firmness is a thought of a settled stable purpose which isn't easily disturbed. The Corinthians were prone to fickleness and instability, but let our faith be so settled and stable that nothing ever moves us. Finally, let us remember that whatever we do for the Lord is never done in vain.

Before I summarise what we've learned this morning, I just want to come back to where we began with Benjamin Franklin, and quote an epitaph he wrote for himself which I think wonderfully catches the spirit of what we've been considering:

“The body of B Franklin, printer, (like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out and stripped of its lettering and gilding) lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost; for it will (as he believed) appear once more, in a new and elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author.”

So what have we learned this morning. In advent we celebrate the second coming of Christ, and we've been looking at what will happen at that second coming. We see that we shall be resurrected at the second coming of Christ into imperishable and immortal bodies, because of the victory which Christ won for us through his crucifixion and glorious resurrection and ascension. Our afterlife will not be some immaterial existence, but a glorious physical rebirth into immortal bodies. Through Christ a final and irreversible victory over death has been won for all believers in Christ. We see that during our time here on earth we should give ourselves fully to God's work so that many may be saved through being brought to faith in Christ.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Father thank you that through the death and resurrection of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, you are offering us the immense and indeed inconceivable gift of resurrection into imperishable and immortal bodies and the opportunity to be with you and our Lord Jesus throughout all eternity. Let us all share the gospel widely this Christmas to bring that blessing to many. Thank you Father. Amen.