

Life After Death (1): He is Risen!

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I want you, if you can, to imagine a country that you've never seen, perhaps somewhere on the other side of the world, perhaps somewhere you've never been to, somewhere beautiful, somewhere safe, everything is right, nothing is broken, a wonderful place that you've never seen, a taste of heaven, you could say. And then imagine you have a friend, and this friend goes away for a while, but this friend comes back, and he or she says to you, you know, I've been away in that wonderful place that we've talked about. I've seen it. I've been there. I've smelt it. I've touched it. I've tasted it. And guess what? I had to go back there because I've come into my inheritance. That place is my family home, and now I own all of it. And I've got some good news. Because you're my friend, I want to take you there to live with me and with my father. There's a home, there's a place there with your name on it. It's waiting for you. And the time isn't just now, but when the time does come,

I will come and I will take you there to live with me. You don't have to pay. There's no costs. There's no small print. And it doesn't happen what, it doesn't matter what happens between now and then. Only trust me, be my faithful friend, and when the time comes, you can share my inheritance in that wonderful place. I wonder what would you do? What would you say to that friend who had been there and come back and told you that? How would it make you feel? How close would you want to stay to that friend who had made that promise to you? How often would you think of that wonderful place? How much would you hope for the day when it was right for you to go there with your friend?

Perhaps it sounds too good to be true. Maybe it's hard to imagine. But if we're Christians, in fact, something much better than that is true, because the Lord Jesus didn't just go away to a far-off and wonderful and imaginary place. The Lord Jesus, our faithful friend, laid down his life for us. He died in our place, and he returned from the dead. He was raised from the dead, and he says to us, if your trust is in me, there is a wonderful place that I have prepared for you beyond death.

Listen to what he says in John chapter 14. My father's house has many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I'm going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.

A place with your name on it, he says, where I am. Where is he? Well, a place not only beautiful and safe and right, but infinitely beyond the furthest stretches of our imaginations. A place of undimmed beauty, of unspoiled goodness, of unfading light, the eternal home of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And listen to what Jesus prays for his people in John 17. What does Jesus want?

[3 : 5 3] He says, Father, I desire that they also whom you have given me may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

Brothers and sisters, our faithful friend, the Lord Jesus, wants for us to be with him where he is, to see him as he is in all his glory. That is his prayer. You don't have to save up or pay in installments. He says, it doesn't matter what happens between now and then. It's free, it's unconditional, it's ours in Christ. What do we do? What can we say? How does it make us feel? How close does it make us want to be with that friend? What would change in your life here and now if you were living for that promise and that hope and that prayer? Now, I don't normally plan topical series. Normally, we're working our way through a book of the Bible, but for the next few weeks, I want to take us through the Bible's teaching about life after death because the resurrection that we celebrated last Sunday tells us that death is not the end of the story.

And so, where does the story go after we die? Now, of all the topics that we could look at in the Bible, maybe you're thinking, why is something so distant and vague as that? Why not something much more practical and relevant for living life right now? But really, it is shockingly relevant, isn't it?

It is relevant to us because it's one of the only things that every single one of us is going to face in life. Our own death and the death of those whom we love. If Christ does not return first, we are all going to die. And so, if you are not sure whether death is relevant to you, you're not being honest with yourself. For the vast majority of people who've ever lived, death isn't a distant thought. It is a daily reality. I looked at some numbers this week that illustrate that in quite a sobering way. For every thousand children born in the UK today, on average, four would be expected to die before they reach the age of five. Now, unless that's in our family, we don't really hear about that. But back in 1950, it was 44 in every thousand, or about one in 20 children who didn't live to see the age of five. You probably would have known of a family who had lost a child. In 1800, it was 330 in every thousand. So, if you had three children, chances are that one of them will have died before reaching the age of five. So, think of it like this. Having a child would have been a normal experience for a family, for a child to die in your family. Imagine that, a normal experience.

Life expectancy at that time was only 34 years old, and that was only just over 200 years ago in this country. And that death, it wouldn't have been in a hospital. A death happened at home. People will have been familiar with the sight of a body. Most people who have ever lived have lived knowing that they were going to die because they saw it happen all of the time. And so, friends, we are the weird ones. We are weirdly bubble rats from this certain and life-changing event that will come to us, our own death, the death of those whom we love. And those numbers show it's not an age thing either.

[8 : 15] Most of us have kind of decided, haven't we, that we're going to live to the age of 80 or 90, but some die much, much sooner. And some of you do know that, who've grieved parents, children, friends, who have not lived to grow old. And so, if you're not sure whether death is relevant to you, you are in the tiny minority in human history. And so, what the Bible says happens then could not be more relevant, could it? And I hope that through this series we see that it is actually very, very practical how an understanding of what the Bible promises in eternity shapes our lives here and now.

And tonight, all I want us to see as we begin is that what the Bible says about life after death isn't a vague possibility or one option among many or even someone's best guess at what might be.

All I want us to see is that everything the Bible says about life beyond the grave is grounded in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in history. He is the only one who has gone into death and come back to tell us what is true. And so, we'll take a brief look at Jesus' resurrected body, and then we'll take the rest of our time just to skim read the storyline and see that we can have confidence in every chapter of the story after that because of the resurrection.

Or you could think of it a bit like putting up a tent, if you've ever done that. Each of the lines or the gyroops that holds it in place is pegged down into the earth. And so, for Christians, all that we can say and know and hope for life beyond death is held down in that way by the resurrection.

You take those pegs out and what happens? The whole thing goes flying. Unpegging the afterlife from the resurrection only leads to speculation and superstition. But peg it down and we have a glorious, glorious home to hope for and a wonderful life to live for that will never, ever end.

[10 : 33] So, let's begin at the beginning then, that Christ is risen. Christ is risen. What would it have been like to have met Jesus after his resurrection? Have you ever wondered that? What would that have been like to stand in his presence? Perhaps we think it would have been the kind of most intense religious experience in history, like standing next to the sort of spiritual equivalent of a nuclear reactor or something. But no, he simply entered the room, didn't he? That's what we read earlier from Luke. He entered the room. He stood there. He gave them peace and he showed them his body. Luke tells us the disciples thought he was a ghost, but no, he says, look at my hands and my feet. Touch me, he said.

Feel the skin, feel the skin, the tendons, the bones, the muscles, that I am alive. The risen Christ is not like a kind of see-through or cloud-like being. His body is very, very real. So, friends, do not be deceived. Life beyond the grave is real. It is as real as the risen Christ. It's substantial. It has weight.

And in fact, it has more weight. It is more real than this life, these bodies. C.S. Lewis suggested that the reason why Jesus, in his resurrection, could enter locked rooms or vanish from sight is not because his body was somehow kind of lighter or more ghostly or less real than his surroundings, but actually because his body is more real, as easy as walking through fog or coming through a curtain, said Lewis. So it was for the risen Christ moving through the old creation.

Think about it like this. When the har blows in, it looks pretty solid, doesn't it, when you're in it? But when you're walking through it, you assume, you know instinctively that you are the solid one and that the har is just vapor, not the other way around. And so it was with Jesus, his risen body, more concrete, more real than this passing world. He's not a ghost or a spirit, whatever we imagine heaven to be made of. He is risen with real physical substance. His body, think of this, his body is more real than our bodies. His body is the stuff that life beyond the grave is made of, and that stuff is more real. In fact, that's where the word glory comes from. In Hebrew, it's the same as the word for heavy or weighty, kavod. So to be glorified is literally to gain weight in relation to the world around. And so Jesus' glorified body is weightier, heavier, realer than granite walls and locked doors.

Listen to John. He was in the room that day. That which was from the beginning, he said, which we have heard, which we've seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life. The life was made manifest, and we have seen it. What word of life is he talking about that they saw and heard and touched? He's talking about the person and the body of the Lord Jesus. He is saying we laid hands on eternal life, and not just in a kind of spiritual sense, but actually reached out his hand and put his hand on the risen body of the Lord. Eternal life. We felt him. In Acts, Luke says, after his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of 40 days and spoke about the kingdom of God. We read about him eating a piece of fish. He spoke with them as a friend to friends.

[14 : 45] They touched his body. Paul says that he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, he says. That is to tell you firsthand that he was there. In short, brothers and sisters, if we accept the evidence of those who saw and touched Jesus after his resurrection, then life after death becomes very, very real indeed. As real as he is, as real as his body is. Not a vague and distant idea, but the real thing rooted in a person who was dead and now is alive again, who holds the keys, he says, to death and hell. And so the resurrection turns the story around, doesn't it? How do we tend to think of life after death? Maybe as the kind of footnotes to the real life that we're living now, the life that matters? And all that other stuff can kind of wait as the postscript. No, the resurrection tells us that our lives now are only the forward to the real life that is then.

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian tonight, I don't know what you think about all this. I don't know what you think happens when we die. Most people believe something, it's quite rare in my experience to actually meet someone who thinks that there really is nothing after death. But if you want real solid hope for life after death, let me encourage you then to start with the resurrection of Jesus. Ask, how do we know it happened? Why are we staking so much? Our lives and our deaths, why are we staking it on the resurrection? If you start further on in the story, if you start with heaven or hell, it's like picking up a book and opening it randomly in the middle and expecting it to make sense. It just won't. And so if you're not sure tonight, just grab me afterwards or grab someone who saw you as you came in, grab someone who invited you or someone sitting next to you and say, tell me why you believe Jesus rose from the dead. Walk me through the evidence, show me in the Bible because that's where the story begins. And without the beginning, there is no rest of the story.

Death can't be the end because Jesus is risen. And life beyond death must be real because Jesus' risen body is real. This is what gives us confidence in the rest of the unfolding story.

And so tonight, beginning with that, just rooting ourselves in that one historical fact, beginning with the resurrection, I just want to sketch out for us what the Bible says is the rest of the story. Or taking the tent analogy, if the resurrection is our grounding, I just want to lightly peg down the points that we're going to press in throughout the rest of our series. Because if the resurrection is real, then the rest of the story is really, really real.

Okay, first peg, then the resurrection grounds our confidence in heaven. Okay, how confidently do we believe in a real heaven? Or what sort of heaven do we think might be there? Is it kind of chubby angels sitting on clouds playing harps? Or sort of a see-through existence, a ghost town populated by spirits? Yeah, whatever we think, strangely, the one person who's often missing from our visions of heaven is the one person that the Bible wants us to be sure is there.

[18 : 41] Okay, the curtain is pulled back from heaven. And what, or rather, who does John see and hear? Revelation 1 tells us this. When I turned, I saw one like a son of man, dressed in a robe, reaching down to his feet with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand, he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me. Who is this? And said, do not be afraid. I am the first and the last. I am the living one. I was dead, and now look.

I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades. Who is there? Who does John see standing, reigning, glorified in heaven? The risen Christ.

The veil is drawn back, and what John sees is a who. What is heaven without him? It is like a sea without water. It is like a dawn without light. When Paul writes about heaven, listen, the wonder for him is the thought of being with the risen Christ there. Listen to these famous words from Philippians 1. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I'm to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know. I'm torn between the two. For, listen, I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. See, for Paul, that the contrast is not between life here on earth or life in heaven, is it? It's a contrast between serving Christ in this life now or going to be with him where he is in his glory. Heaven is not heaven unless it is Christ's home. That is so central to the Bible's vision of heaven, and notice that for Paul, it's a complete no-brainer where he'd rather be, isn't it?

He knows he's needed in this life here and now. He's happy to carry on, but being with Christ in heaven, he says, is hands down the better place to be. I wonder as we begin, how confident are you that heaven is the better place to be for Christ being there? Are we that confident in our hope? Could you say tonight you would prefer to be with Christ where he is? That heaven is better by far because he is there. The resurrection grounds our confidence in heaven, but second peg, it also grounds our hope in Christ's return. We saw this, didn't we? This is the hope the angels gave the church when Jesus ascended. This same Jesus who's been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven. Now, this is where the story gets more complicated for some of us because while culturally there's still an idea of heaven out there, the idea has kind of evaporated, hasn't it, that there's going to be an end of time, a definite point where the world as it is will stop. Okay, that's the stuff of sci-fi. Every kind of sci-fi superhero movie ends, doesn't it, with the hero saving the world from ending. But in our story, the hero Christ saves the world by ending it, by bringing this creation to a close. But that is so far from how we think, how our culture thinks, maybe so far from where we are today. But we heard these words this morning from 2 Peter 3. Listen again. It says, above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, okay, how contemporary does this sound? Where is this coming?

He promised. Where is this coming? He promised. Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. You Christians talk about Jesus coming again. Well, it's been a while, hasn't it? 2,000 years and nothing's changed. The world goes on. Everything is still as it was when he left it. Everything's a closed system, a steady state. Just give up. Surely nothing's going to change.

[23 : 47] He's not coming back. But, says Peter, the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar. The elements will be destroyed by fire. The earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. It will be a day like no other day in human history. How do we know he's coming? How do we know that day is in the diary? Again, because Jesus is risen, what did the angels say?

He will come back just as he went. Here's Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4. He says, For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven. He will see to it personally, Paul is saying. With a loud command, the voice of an archangel, the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. We believe he died and rose again, and so we believe he will come again. He told us he would be raised, and he was. He told us he will return. So what? Surely he will.

Surely he will. That is our great hope for the future. And friends, if heaven is better than here, then the Bible is quite clear that Christ's return is better still, even, than the hope of heaven.

Because, third peg, when he comes, he will raise the dead. Did you know heaven is not our final home? That is not where we will live forever. Listen to Jesus in John 5. Do not be amazed at this, he says, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out. Those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

Like when a judge walks into a courtroom, what happens? What's said? All rise. All rise. So it will be when Jesus comes. He will give the word. Our bodies and souls will be reunited, and we will all rise in his presence. The very first Christians found that as hard to take in as perhaps we do. Okay, how will that work? They thought, what kind of bodies will we be raised in?

[26 : 16] Maybe they thought Jesus just meant a spiritual resurrection, and our hearts become alive. But no, said Paul. He means an actual physical bodily resurrection. If it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised, he said. If we're not going to rise, then Christ has never been raised. But, he says, Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. The first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. The first fruits of a harvest was the beginning, like a sample, like a handful of grain from the field, like a bottle of wine from the vineyard.

And what did the first fruits tell you? It told you what the rest of the crop is going to be like. It told you the quality, the substance, the type, what it tastes like, what it felt like, what it looked like, what it sounded like. That is how Paul describes Jesus' resurrection. Just the taste there.

Just the sample, just the beginning of the much greater harvest that is still to come. Since he has been raised and his body glorified, then he says, so must we be raised who are united with him and our bodies glorified. He has, so we will. And that gives us incredible hope for our bodies, doesn't it? Our bodies that get sick, that grow weary and tired, that grow old, that stop working. Here's Paul again in Philippians 3. But our citizenship is in heaven, he says.

And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. That's why we looked at his body. Remember his body. What was it like? A real body. A body you could touch. A weighty body. A substantial body. A glorious body. That is what our bodies will be like then.

[28 : 37] Not less alive, not less real, but more alive. More whole, more real than even now. His resurrection secures heaven. His return. Our resurrection. Fourth peg. A day of judgment. A day of judgment. Again, listen to Paul in Acts 17. In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. Okay, God appointed the judge of the whole world on Easter Sunday. Did you know that? That's when the date went in the diary.

And for as much comfort as there is in the resurrection, all that it secures for us about life beyond the grave, we can't escape the stark warning of the resurrection. That the judge will come and that judgment is in his hands. A just judge. To judge, to weigh every word, thought, and deed.

Friends, if there is such a thing as a real heaven, the resurrection assures us that there is such a thing as a real hell. We can't avoid that. As uncomfortable as it makes us, Jesus himself has more to say about it than anyone. Listen to his words in Matthew 25. When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne, the throne of a judge. All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Then he says, some will go away to eternal punishment, but others to eternal life.

We must confess a final judgment because we believe in him that he is raised. God has made sure that days in the diary of every person who has ever lived, me and you included, and we will not miss it.

And brothers and sisters, even though we know, I hope tonight, that Christ's death is sufficient to cover all our sins, that his resurrection is sufficient to see us into eternal life, even as we stand on that assurance, know that we will also stand before him on that throne and give an account. So says Paul, we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it, for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. The judge has been raised, and so the living and the dead will rise to be judged. But know this, those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will be saved on that day before the beginning of the final chapter, his resurrection secures the new creation. In keeping with his promise, said Peter, we are looking forward to a new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells. The resurrection was day one of a new cosmos, a renewed creation, the world made whole, put back together, restored, the universe set free from the curse of our sin. It was the beginning of no more death, no more crying, no more dying, no more suffering, no more sin, no more serpents. And the new creation, the new heavens, the new earth will be real, friends, as his resurrected body, as real as our resurrected bodies, a renewed heaven and earth where righteousness is at home, says Peter. And this is where it ends, the story, if we can say that it truly ends, because in the end, the story will only go on and on, time without end, ages and ages.

[32 : 57] Next week, we're going to be looking at what the Bible has to say about eternity. Not to give away any spoilers, but there will be time in eternity, time that will never end, time into the ages. Some of you might know how the last Narnia story ends, the last battle, as the children stand on the shore of a new land after the great last fight. C.S. Lewis says this, for us, this is the end of all the stories. And we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page. Now at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before.

Friends, I hope that what we begin to see in this series is that our lives here and now are only the cover and the title page of the wonderful story that God has written for us in Christ, that begins with his resurrection, but carries on forever and ever in a wonderful and real place with a wonderful, real and risen Savior. I hope we find real confidence in that promise.

I hope we learn to live our lives in the light of that promise. I hope our lives change as we think of how our lives will change forever when he comes. Because all of this is rooted in the reality that we have already seen, that Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Let's praise him together as we pray.