

Resurrection implications: Don't labour in vain

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Father, once again I pray the words of Colossians 1, verse 28 to 29.

I pray that you will help me to strive and contend with all your energy so that the word of God might be brought forth to teach and admonish everyone to present everyone mature in Christ.

I pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Let me begin by reading again the commands of verse 58. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm.

Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Now, those are strong and substantial commands, aren't they? They are direct, they are unambiguous, they are straightforward.

And as Christians who love the Lord, we do want to obey them. But sometimes we feel that obeying these commands are anything but straightforward. I mean, how often do we have good intentions to sit down and read our Bible and pray, only to discover ourselves scrolling on our phones just five minutes later?

[1 : 1 3] How often do we have good intentions to try to have a meaningful gospel conversation with a non-Christian friend? But at that crucial moment, we just chicken out.

How often do we want to love our brother or sister who is currently hurting, who is having a difficult time, but we don't dare reach out, afraid that it would consume us and leave us completely drained? How can we give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord when we feel so double-minded? Well, Paul says that's where the doctrine of the resurrection comes in.

So far in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul has been giving us a masterclass on the bodily resurrection of Christ. In verses 1 to 11, he establishes the fact of the resurrection.

It's true, he says, Jesus has really risen again. That's what the scriptures foretold, and that's what the eyewitnesses swear to. The tomb is empty.

[2 : 1 8] Jesus is alive. And then in verses 12 to 34, Paul unpacks for us the significance of the resurrection. If Christ has not been raised, he says, then we're all idiots.

Our faith is futile. We remain in our sins. Our witness has no credibility. Our hope has no content. But because Christ has been raised, we too will one day be raised with him as Christ establishes his kingdom once and for all.

But the question is then raised, what is the nature of our resurrection? What will our bodies be like? And that's what Ben showed us last week from verses 35 to 49, that our bodies will be renewed in glorious splendor, that we will bear the image of the second Adam, Christ himself.

But we're left with one more question. Which is, what does all this have to do with the present? I can see that the resurrection shapes my future, but how does it shape my here and now?

And Paul is going to say to us, my friends, it shapes your today more than you can ever imagine. For resurrection means that you can prepare yourselves to give up everything for Christ.

[3 : 4 9] Resurrection means that you can give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. How so? Well, just before we get to that, let's clarify something else first.

What exactly are we talking about when we're talking about the work of the Lord? In recent years, a few influential pastors and scholars, including those that I have great respect for, whom I've learned a lot from, have interpreted the work of the Lord here in the broadest possible manner.

to mean anything and everything you do for God. And so the work of the Lord here is then taken to mean everything from building bridges to changing diapers.

And sometimes people take the command here to give yourselves fully to the Lord, to mean working long hours to be the best architect that you can possibly be, or to be so devoted to chasing perfection as a musician or as a graphic designer.

And it's completely understandable why such an interpretation is attractive, because it gives all work great dignity. It safeguards against a kind of dualism that suggests that unless you are evangelising somebody, everything else is completely useless and meaningless.

[5 : 19] And so first of all, let me state this as clearly as I can. Such dualism should indeed be resisted. The Bible does indeed affirm the goodness of all work.

All work for the Lord matters, whether that's fixing computers or feeding toddlers. For when you work in all those ways, you are expressing your love for others.

You want people to benefit from the fruit of your labours. And God values that. All work for the Lord matters.

But, the work of the Lord in 1 Corinthians 15 should be distinguished from that broader work for the Lord.

Let me just give you two reasons why. First of all, if you jump ahead one chapter to 1 Corinthians 16, verse 10, you would notice that same exact phrase, the work of the Lord, pops up again.

[6 : 25] When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am.

And the context demands that Paul here must be talking more specifically about the work of the gospel, since that's the work Paul is doing.

He's talking about the work of evangelising non-Christians and edifying Christians. of helping established followers of Jesus and equipping them to serve and to mature.

That's confirmed for us down in 16, verse 15 to 16, where Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to submit to such labourers. And so it is such work that is in view here, rather than work in general.

And that's also confirmed for us when we recognise that verse 58 flows out of verses 1 to 57. That's the second reason.

[7 : 33] You see, this encouragement to give ourselves to the work of the Lord didn't just come out of nowhere. Paul has just spent the entire chapter discussing the gospel of the resurrection.

And it is to this gospel that Paul gives his entire life to. And that's why, back in verses 31 and 32, he puts himself in danger.

He faces death constantly. And that's how he gives himself to the work of the Lord. And so the context again suggests that we take the work of the Lord here to refer to gospel ministry.

Now, one more clarification before we move on. That doesn't mean that this applies only to pastors and missionaries and church planters and what we often call full-time workers.

The work of evangelism and edification of reaching out and of building up is done by every member of the body of Christ.

[8 : 43] And that's the work, Paul says, he wants every Christian to give themselves to with all their hearts and soul. Whatever work we're involved in, more generally, that's the work that cannot be neglected.

Now that we've clarified that, let's come back to our original question. How can we give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord?

Well, let me take an analogy from photography. From what I understand, whenever you take a photograph, you should have a focal point. That's the part of the image where you want to draw the viewer's eye, where you want to focus their attention.

And so to answer this question, Paul gives us two focal points in verses 50 to 57. So as we look at the big picture of the resurrection, these are the two aspects of the image he especially wants us to focus on so as to encourage us to do this work of the Lord.

So here's our first focal point, our certain transformation, our certain transformation. Now, I wonder if you've ever had the embarrassing experience of turning up for some event in the completely wrong clothes.

[10 : 21] I once heard an American tell this story. She had moved to Rumqi in Xinjiang in China to work as a teacher. Now, if you didn't know, Xinjiang is where the Uyghurs live and most of them are Muslims.

So one day this teacher went to visit a market in a conservative Muslim neighbourhood. She wore a long-sleeved shirt with long sleeves as well as long leggings.

She was sure that she was being modest. But she still kept receiving strange looks. Later on, she asked her Uyghur friend what was wrong. I wore long pants and a long-sleeved shirt.

What's wrong with that? Well, he sheepishly said, I suppose you're still new here so you can be excused. But those trousers you are wearing, that's what the ladies wear for underwear here. She was inappropriately dressed. Now, that's a bit of a funny story, but Paul says that's our situation.

[11:30] We have an invitation to move into God's neighbourhood, the Kingdom of God. But there's a dress code and we are inappropriately dressed.

For we are presently clothed in flesh and blood, verse 50, and it's not fit for the new creation. Why not? Well, verse 50 again, for one thing, my body is perishable.

It's like those food items that spoil quickly, that decay and go bad at room temperature. But the Kingdom of God is imperishable.

And so my body is not qualified to enter. Just like the fact that I have certain anatomical features means that I am barred from entering the ladies' bathroom.

So the fact that my body has these perishable features bars me from entering the Kingdom. After all, it's going to be the new creation. And so my body needs to be new creation bodies as well.

[12:40] And that means my body must not only be imperishable, but also immortal. After all, the Kingdom of God is eternal, but verse 53, our bodies are mortal.

They can die. They've still got the DNA of death. And that's because our present bodies are fallible. They're not evil in themselves, but they can still be vehicles for sin.

They can still have wrong desires and can still act in ungodly ways. and so they can bring about death. And such a fallible body certainly cannot come into the glorious presence of a holy God.

They'll be consumed like the perishable and mortal body they are. And so that's the state that every single human being is in.

You know, think of the phone that you carry in your pocket. What happens when it's not plugged into charge? Well, you see your battery indicator drop from 100% to 90% to 50% all the way down to zero unless you're plugged in.

[13:56] And all of us are like those phones where because we're cut off from the source of life, God himself, our bodies simply move in one direction from 100% to zero.

Now, if you're someone who is young today, you might not feel that at all. You're feeling like you're 90%. You're feeling good. You're ready to take on a heavy load. But you're not always going to be at 90%.

You will wear out. But, Paul says, this is where our first focal point comes in.

This is where resurrection changes everything. For now, Paul leans in and he whispers to us verse 51. Listen, I tell you a mystery.

We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed. We will be transformed. Every single person in Christ is going to be dressed in a new body.

[15:08] one that verse 53 says will be imperishable and immortal. And that's because you're plugged into the right source, Christ himself.

And here's the amazing thing. When I first got my current phone, one of the things that I was attracted to was the fact that it claimed to have rapid charging.

It claimed to be able to go from 0% to 60% after 30 minutes of charging. But how long does it take for our bodies to be transformed?

Verse 52 tells us, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. The idea here is the smallest possible unit of time.

It won't take 30 minutes. In fact, it'll be quicker than the time you take to blink once. And that's how radical this transformation is. That's what Jesus achieves for us.

[16:11] Something no technology or philosophy on this earth will be able to do. What a hope we have. And it will be a certainty.

Look at the second half of verse 52. And notice how many times the word will is used. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

Jesus will come back, and everyone will know it. The full harvest following the first fruits will come in. And these fruits will never go bad.

this transformation isn't like some temporary weight loss program where you might lose 5kg after a few months, only to gain it back after a few weeks.

No, this transformation is certain and permanent. Let that sink in. If anyone is in Christ, that's what they have to look forward to.

[17 : 23] And so that's our first focal point, our future certain transformation. But, how does that help us give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord?

Well, consider this. What is one of the favourite pastimes of most human beings? Simple. We always want to change people.

So, as a married person, we want to change our spouse. As a parent, we want to change our children. As a boss, we want to change our employees. As a colleague, we want to change our fellow workers.

As a friend, we want to change our friends. And often we do so sincerely, out of good intentions, because we want them to become a better person.

But if we are truly honest with ourselves, deep down, we also know that sometimes we do it simply because we want them to fit the ideal image that we have of them in our minds.

[18 : 34] But the problem is that often the image that we want them to conform to is flawed, because it's an image that we've conjured up ourselves.

conforms to our preferences, our desires, our likings, our fancies, not all of which are godly or kingdom focused.

things. But this is what the gospel does. It's powerful enough to change people. And it changes people not to conform to images that we've conjured up.

It changes people to conform to the image of Christ. It softens hearts, it renews minds, it redirects our desires, it empowers our will.

And above all, it causes us to fully reassume our status as image bearers of God. In short, we can be who we were always meant to be.

[19 : 44] And we will see that clearly on the last day when we will be fully and certainly transformed in the blink of an eye. We will have the capacity to worship God without daydreaming, without our hearts being distracted, with a depth unimaginable.

Think how wonderful that will be. That's the power of the gospel. And so that means any work of the Lord you do today is worth it.

When you open the Bible with others on a Friday evening, you're not just involved in a reading comprehension exercise. evangelize. You're putting someone on the path to gospel transformation.

When you take time to go and show the love of Christ to someone else, you're not just doing someone a favor. You're putting someone on the path to gospel transformation. When you pluck up the courage to speak to a non-believing friend, you are not being overbearing.

You're putting someone on the path of gospel transformation. for every time we evangelize, edify, encourage, or equip someone else with the truth and love of Christ, we are helping someone move towards or stay on the path that will eventually lead them to being transformed to the best possible version of who they will always intended to be.

[21 : 22] You're doing nothing less than giving them their best possible future. What a privilege that is. And when we face frustrations in doing the work of the Lord, when we find things are not moving, or even that the work seems unfulfilling, well, this focal point helps us persevere.

It helps us stay patient with others, and with ourselves. Because we know this transformation is future, our expectations are not unrealistic.

We know that that person at the Bible study is unlikely to instantly become super godly even after being fed good theology. We have to be patient. But because we know this transformation is certain, we know that although it's hard work to keep encouraging that brother or sister in Christ who seems stuck despite our constant attempts to help them move forward spiritually, well, we persevere, we stick at it.

Because one day, transformation will come. So that's our first focal point, our certain transformation.

But Paul now gives us a second focal point, our certain victory, our certain victory. Now, as a pastor, I have the privilege to conduct both weddings and funerals, funerals, and on the face of it, one seems to have nothing to do with the other.

[23 : 05] Weddings, after all, tend to be celebrations of youth, to be a joyful occasion, to be the marker of a brand new life for the bride and the bridegroom. Funerals, on the other hand, tend to be associated with old age, with sadness, with sobriety.

They mark the end of life. And so you don't bring the two together. But not everyone saw it that way. Herodotus, the Greek historian, tells us about a certain Egyptian custom.

After a banquet, a servant will bring about a coffin with the image of a dead man in it. And each guest is instructed to gaze at it and to remember to eat and drink and to be married now. For when you die, they said, this will be you. I mean, just imagine attending a wedding party where that happened.

That would be very uncomfortable for us to say the least, wouldn't it? But the Egyptians were clear-eyed about their future. They understood that now is the time to celebrate, for our future is nothing but doom and gloom.

[24 : 32] But here's the thing, Christians also bring the two together. But for the Christian, it's the exact reverse of the ancient Egyptians.

Like every other human being, we know that we too will face death. every one of us will have our own funeral someday. And we know that it's a sad occasion, it's something to grieve. But at the same time, how the Egyptians saw wedding banquets as eventually giving way to funeral rites, Christians see the opposite.

death. As Tim Kellis writes, death becomes like the dark door to a banquet hall. Or as the German theologian Dietrich von Haifa said, as he was arrested by the Nazis and led away to be executed, for me, this is the beginning of life.

For my brothers and sisters, why is it that when death comes for the Christian, they can look him in the eye and still say, we win, you lose?

[25 : 55] How is it that we can confidently tell death, he himself will die? Answer, because God has neutralised death by removing the venom of sin.

In verse 56, we learn that sin has weaponised the law. Because we have been poisoned by sin, the law says that we are guilty and worthy of condemnation.

And so the law giver must sentence us to death. But as the commentator Anthony Thessleton says, Christ himself has absorbed the sting and poison of death.

He is the antidote. He removes the poison. He gets rid of the DNA of death. He ensures that the weaponisation of the law fails because he himself keeps and fulfils the law perfectly.

And with that he turns death into a mere doorway. It's a waiting room, a place to count the hours until the risen Christ comes again to turn it into a dressing room.

[27 : 07] And then when Jesus clothes us with imperishable and immortal bodies, what comes next? A great party. Jesus will host a wedding banquet.

And at that banquet, verse 55, this great song, once sung by the prophets Isaiah and Hosea will be belted out in full voice.

Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, oh, death, is your victory? Where, oh, death, is your sting? It will be like the victory thorn at a football game sung by the fans of the winning side. For we know the game has been won. We had a funeral this past week, but we know that one day there will never be funerals ever again.

That funeral was not the end of the story. For God has slapped eternal sanctions on death, ensuring that it will never act aggressively ever again.

[28 : 17] Death will be completely swallowed up. And all this is given by God. Verse 57, but thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so it is to be received as a gift. If you're someone listening in this morning and you're not a Christian, then know that this is the good news of Christianity.

There is victory over death, and this victory is given as a gift. And you can receive this gift if you trust in Jesus, that he says he is who he is, the king of your life, who can rescue you.

And that's why we give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord. When we help someone know Jesus for the first time, or help someone know Jesus better, it's not simply because we want people to get a little morality.

It's not simply because we think it's nice if that person can come to church more regularly. No, it's because the work of the Lord is about eternity. It's about the most significant victory that a person could ever gain, even if he's considered a loser by any other standard.

[29 : 39] It's why someone like Paul Ling is committed to planting a gospel-centered church in Kuching. It's not simply because he thinks it would be nice if people can get a little bit more religion. No, it's because he wants as many people as possible to join that final day of celebration.

And we can give ourselves fully knowing that this victory is certain. You see, our position is like those of the O's in this tic-tac-toe game that should be appearing on the screen.

Now, you can see that this tic-tac-toe game is not over yet. We still need to make the move. The game still needs to be played out.

But if we are the O's, we operate from a winning position. And that gives us the motivation for Jesus to receive our 100% devotion.

For in him, we have our second focal point, our certain victory. And it is precisely because we have these two focal points that our lives are to be given over solely and exclusively for the Lord.

[31 : 04] And that's what the first word of verse 58, therefore, means. because we have this assurance of certain transformation, because we have this assurance of certain victory, because we have all this thanks to Christ's resurrection, therefore, verse 58 is nothing less than God's will for our lives.

And what is his will? In a nutshell, it's to labour steadfastly, to labour steadfastly. Or to expand it more, it is the commands of verse 58, to stand firm, to let nothing move you, and to always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

Now, the very fact that Paul causes us to stand firm and let nothing move you presupposes that there are things in this world that could cause us to stumble, that there are things in this world that could cause us to lose our grip, to slip up, to shake us, and to move us away.

And the way to stand firm is to keep hanging on to Jesus. That's what he reminds us right at the beginning of 1 Corinthians chapter 15 back in verse 1.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preach to you, which you receive, and on which you have taken your stand.

[32 : 35] Do you see that? The very person we are not to let go of is the person who keeps us firm in the first place.

And one big way to keep hanging on to Jesus is to keep giving ourselves fully to the work of the Lord. It's not to be half-hearted about it, it's not something to just give your spare time to.

The preacher Francis Chan once gave this illustration. He says, imagine a rope that goes on forever and ever. And just imagine that this rope is a timeline of our existence.

And on one end of that rope is a short red section, maybe about an inch long. Meanwhile, the rest of the rope represents our lives in eternity.

But Francis Chan says, here's what really blows his mind. Some of us only think about the red section. Maybe we think, oh, I'm going to spend half my red section trying to earn as much as I can, so I can enjoy the last remaining one-third of an inch of that red section to travel or to live comfortably or something like that.

[33 : 52] it's as if we think that the rope only consists of the red section. We've forgotten the remainder of the rope.

And yet the Bible says, what we do during that little red section of our lives is going to have a huge impact on what happens on the rest of that everlasting rope.

So why would we want to spend this red part trying to make ourselves as comfortable as we can, trying to enjoy ourselves as much as we can, as if that red section is all there is?

Why would we invest in things that are peripheral rather than things that are central? So perhaps you're a parent today, and yes, by all means, work hard to provide for your children.

Make sure they do their school work. Give them experiences. sure. But above all, help them know Jesus. Teach them about the grace that God has given to us.

[35 : 01] And model for them the grace that Christ has shown us. And communicate to them constantly that Jesus matters more than your academic performance, or your popularity, or your gifts and abilities.

So that on that last day, when the trumpet sounds, they too will be transformed and share in the victory alongside you.

Because they know Jesus too. Don't you want that more than anything else? Isn't that more important than whether they got an A or a B on a maths test when they're 15?

Or perhaps you're a retiree today. And yes, by all means, enjoy your rest. Now that the borders have opened, sure, enjoy your travels.

Enjoy your weekly hiking and your kopitiam catch-ups. But don't retire from Jesus or from what he's called you to do. Look for opportunities to share the gospel with those of your age.

[36 : 08] Look to serve the gospel by serving his people in church. After all, God didn't say, always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord until you're 60.

Then okay, after that, you only have to give half. No, please do read verse 58 again. Give yourselves fully until the day you fall asleep in Christ so that on that last day, when the trumpet sounds, you know you've made the right investments.

You don't have to admit to Jesus when he asks you that you wasted the second half of your life.

This week, we've just celebrated the life of our former elder, Nicholas Patrick.

And one of the things that struck me was how consistently people shared about his great passion to give himself fully to the work of the Lord, whether in Iban Longhouses in the 1970s or in Myanmar in the 2010s.

He was someone who exemplified 1 Corinthians 15 verse 58. So my friends, that's how the resurrection impacts us in the here and now, by showing us that we don't have to live only for the here and now.

[37 : 37] You don't have to chase more money by taking on more and more extra jobs until you're too tired to do anything else. For you will one day rise again and have all you ever needed.

You don't have to chase more prestige trying to keep up with the world. For you're already assured that you will one day have the highest status possible. You'll be transformed like Christ and you will reign with him.

You don't have to chase more experiences afraid that you will miss out. For the resurrection says you will never miss out on the greatest experience possible, living in the new creation.

Back at the beginning of this chapter in 15 verse 2, Paul says this, if you do not hold firmly to the word I preach to you, you have believed in vain.

But at the end of this chapter, he says this, when you give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, you know your labour is never in vain.

[38 : 49] So don't give up, remember the resurrection, zoom in on these focal points, and labour steadfastly on. let's pray.

Let's pray. Father, we pray that we would drink in of what you've just said to us in your word.

We thank you so much that you have given us imperishable and immortal bodies, that this is the great hope that every believer in Christ has. We thank you for that certain victory over death, that even now, we grieve, and yet we can grieve with hope because of that certain victory.

And so, Father, we pray that those focal points will help us to keep standing firm, to be immovable, to be steadfast, and to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord in the time that we have here.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.