



# Firwood Church

These are the notes of a sermon preached at Firwood Church by Andy Evans on the morning of the 26 April 2009; these notes are, therefore, intended to be read in conjunction with the sermon. To download sermons and other free resources, visit [www.firwoodchurch.com](http://www.firwoodchurch.com) or subscribe through iTunes.

## THE MOST IMPORTANT THING – WEEK 4, GOSPEL TRIUMPH

### 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

<sup>50</sup>I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. <sup>51</sup>Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup>in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup>For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. <sup>54</sup>When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup> "O death, where is your victory?  
O death, where is your sting?"

<sup>56</sup>The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup>But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>58</sup> Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

# 1. INTRODUCTION – GOSPEL AFFIRMATION

## a. Gospel inheritance

### 1 Corinthians 15:50

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

The problem with the Corinthian church is that they were fixated upon the here and now. This fixation stemmed from an over-realised eschatology; they believed that they had received all that is promised in Christ in all its fullness. This led to arrogance (they believed that they were wise), self-reliance (they believed they were strong) and all kinds of sin. Throughout Chapter 15, Paul seeks to correct this gospel distortion by applying the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In verse 50, Paul reminds believers of the gospel outcome: that one day we will inherit the kingdom of God.

It is so important for believers in this day and age to note the tense here. Paul writes, 'flesh and blood' (we will return to this in a moment) '*cannot* inherit the kingdom of God. It is clear that Paul has a future event in mind. In other words, in order to inherit the kingdom of God something first must happen.

It is imperative that the Church of Christ returns to a biblical understanding of the kingdom of God. For too long serious thought with regards to the kingdom has been hijacked by the very worst excesses of charismania promoting a distorted gospel fixated on health, wealth and prosperity.

The Scriptures, however, present the kingdom as something which is both now and not yet.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus casts out a demon and sparks a debate among the religious leaders as to whether Jesus is of God or demon possessed himself. In dealing with their questioning and doubt, Jesus makes an astonishing statement,

But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Matthew 12:28)

It is clear that Jesus understands his incarnation, proclamation of the gospel and demonstrations of power (in miraculous works) as evidence that the kingdom of God has indeed invaded this world and is made manifest to men and women.

This is why Jesus is able to disclose the 'secrets of the kingdom of God' (Luke 8:10) and observe, as his disciples also proclaim the gospel and exercise ministry, that the kingdom of God is drawing near (Luke 10:9-11).

Every kingdom has a king and as King Jesus moves in power, the kingdom advances. Hence, Jesus declares that,

"The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." (Luke 17:20-21)

The kingdom of God is in the midst of the people, because Jesus himself is at work.

This is the *now* of the kingdom. As the gospel is proclaimed and advances, and Jesus is seen, we are seeing the kingdom of God break through into the lives of men and women. Thus, the church should be able to say, 'Here is the kingdom of God', as we see transformed lives, people living in accordance with kingdom values and Christ Jesus being glorified.

However, this is not all that Scripture has to say with regards to the kingdom of God.

Consider, therefore, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom,

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 4:17)

Again we see that the kingdom is inextricably linked with the gospel: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (the Gospels use the terms, 'kingdom', 'kingdom of heaven' and 'kingdom of heaven' interchangeably).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is clear that although the kingdom is 'at hand', it is still not yet.

Consider also Mark's record of the inauguration of Jesus' ministry,

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14-15)

Note the way in which Jesus proclaims the gospel, 'the kingdom of God is at hand' and yet 'the time is fulfilled. It seems, therefore, that there is both an immanence and expectation when it comes to the kingdom of God. It is both here and not yet here.

For the believer it is imperative that we hold both of these truths in balance. If we over emphasize the 'now', we find ourselves in the position of the Corinthian church living for the moment and failing to understand that we only see in part and that this life is, in some respects, preparation for the life to come. Such misunderstanding results in either arrogance (we believe we have attained complete spirituality), license (we do not expect and therefore do not fear the coming judgement) or both.

If, however, we become overly fixated on the 'not now', we will find ourselves disengaging from ministry, gospel proclamation and instead hiding out in a cellar waiting for the Lord's return.

Neither extreme is healthy and neither extreme is biblical.

We are called to live in the light of the now/but not yet kingdom.

## **b. Gospel necessity**

### **i. The nature of the kingdom**

And so Paul's explanation and application of the gospel is intended to correct an over-realised eschatology which has, in turn, led to an unhealthy fixation on the now. He reminds the church that the final outcome of the gospel will be seen in Christ's return and the inheritance of the kingdom of God.

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<sup>1</sup>*Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) (1:582). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

In order to understand Paul's train of thought here, we must understand the nature of the coming kingdom.

Jesus declares,

..."My kingdom is not of this world..." (John 18:36)

This is almost certainly the thought behind Matthew's distinctive designation, 'the kingdom of heaven', opposed to the other Gospel writers more familiar, 'the kingdom of God'. Jesus' principle point is that the kingdom is 'opposed to everything present and earthly', but, more than this, that this kingdom originates from without this world; the kingdom originates in and belongs to him.<sup>2</sup> Christ's return is, therefore, 'the Son of Man coming in his kingdom' (Matthew 16:28).

This kingdom is unlike the things of this earth, it is also permanent and imperishable. The promise of Scripture is, therefore, twofold: we have a King who reigns for ever and we have a kingdom which lasts forever,

"...he [Jesus] will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." (Luke 1:33)

## ii. Flesh and blood

All of this underpins Paul's explanation of the gospel and the importance of the future resurrection of the dead. Believers are to live faithfully in the here and now, occupying themselves in kingdom work, but in an expectation that on that day we will enter our inheritance and partake of the kingdom of God (e.g. Luke 13:29).

For Paul, there is, therefore, a practical importance in the truth that we will receive resurrection bodies, Paul understands that 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable' (1 Corinthians 15:50).

This is similar territory to that covered last week (in verses 42 through to 44). The truth of resurrection bodies is critical to the believer because the promise of the spiritual body is bound up in the promise of our future inheritance of the kingdom of God. Resurrection bodies are necessary for resurrection life.

Paul expands upon this and gives us two reasons for the necessity of resurrection bodies. The first is implied in the term 'flesh and blood'; Paul concludes that '*flesh and blood* cannot inherit the kingdom of God'.

The term, 'flesh and blood', is most often used (particularly in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament), to refer to the weakness and vulnerability of the human condition.<sup>3</sup> It is likely, therefore, that Paul is making the point that frail, sin ravaged and sin inclined bodies are unfit and unsuitable to enter the kingdom of God. In this case, Paul is looking toward the final redemption of our bodies at which time we will no longer struggle with the weakness of the flesh. Such a body, the spiritual resurrection body, is necessary for such an inheritance.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Thiselton, A. C. (2000). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians : A commentary on the Greek text* (1291). Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans.

### iii. Perishable/Imperishable

Paul's second conclusion is that, 'the perishable [does not] inherit the imperishable'. As we considered last week, the perishable simply refers to our present state of death and decay. Paul's rationale is, therefore, elementary: decaying, death-riddled bodies are utterly unsuited for inheriting an imperishable, eternal kingdom.

### c. We shall be changed

#### 1 Corinthians 15:51-52

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

### i. Mystery and Revelation

Paul's introduction into this great explanation of the triumph of the gospel is astonishing, 'Behold, I tell you a mystery'. The word *mystery* (*mysterion* in Greek) is, in this context, a reference to supernatural revelation. In this context, *mysterion* is taken to refer to 'some sacred thing hidden or secret which is naturally unknown to human reason and is only known by the revelation of God'.<sup>4</sup> Paul begins, therefore, by declaring a mystery, a revelation which has been revealed to him supernaturally.

Paul does not explain how or when he received this revelation, but the context seems to suggest that he has the resurrected Christ in view. We know from earlier in the passage that Paul's call and commission was distinct from that of the other Apostles. When travelling to Damascus to persecute Christians, Paul is knocked of his horse and confronted by the resurrected and glorified Christ. I wonder if it is in this moment as he beholds the glory of Christ that the mystery is revealed to him that King Jesus, 'will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body' (Philippians 3:21).<sup>5</sup>

There is an important point here. The glorious truth of the gospel comes through divine revelation. God self-discloses in and through creation. God self-discloses through the inspired and inerrant words of Scripture. God self-discloses and becomes flesh. God self-discloses in new creation,

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

The gospel, the truth of who God is and all that he has done for us, is a revealed mystery. The Apostle Paul, in particular, returns again and again to the truth that this gospel is, in essence, mystery revealed. Paul understands, therefore, as an Apostle his calling is to,

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<sup>4</sup>Zodhiates, S. (2000, c1992, c1993). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.) (G3466). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Although he does not link the revelation with the Damascus road encounter, G. Fee proposes that the theology of resurrection bodies is predicated on the resurrection of Christ, 'Although he does not say so here, the preceding argument makes it certain that this revelation is predicated on the resurrection of Christ, who in his present heavenly existence has assumed a transformed, glorified body.'<sup>3</sup> in G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987), p. 797

...make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. (Colossians 1:25-26, see also, 4:3; Ephesians 3:3, 5:32, 6:19; 1 Timothy 3:16; 1 Corinthians 2:1, 7, 4:1)

We need to understand this because all believers are called to make known the mystery of the gospel. We are among those to whom has been disclosed the secret things of God. We are now called to proclaim this mystery to the entire world.

## **ii. Sudden transformation**

Thus far, Paul has dealt with the resurrection of dead believers. This, however, leaves a question unanswered and it may be that the Corinthian believers were left wondering what would happen to those who were still alive when Christ returns. Perhaps they were worried that those still alive would be left clothed in their natural bodies.

Paul reassures believers,

...We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

The reassurance is clear, whether we sleep (die) or not, we will be changed and this transformation will be swift (*atomos* - Greek for the smallest unit of time, transformation will happen in a moment) and we will be raised 'imperishable'.

There is a greater promise in this, however, Paul describes the moment in which this transformation will take place, this change will occur 'at the last trumpet call'. The mention of the trumpet call is significant in that the theophany is often accompanied by a trumpet call. And so, when Moses goes up Sinai, the mountain is covered by smoke and the trumpet call grows louder and louder (Exodus 19:16-20).

It is important to remember that Paul is, first and foremost, describing the theophany. This is what the last trumpet signals. For believers this moment will be glorious and we will receive much. The scene, however, is all about Jesus. The trumpet call is for neither you nor I, but to signal the arrival of King Jesus.

But why the last trumpet call? Because this will be the final theophany signalling the moment in which God dwells on earth with man (Revelation 21:3). There will be no further theophany for God will be with his people forever.

## **2. GOSPEL TRIUMPH**

### **a. Death swallowed up in victory**

#### **1 Corinthians 15:53-57**

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory?  
O death, where is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul quotes from Isaiah 25:8 and then Hosea 13:14. The destination and outcome of the gospel for believers is the inheritance of the kingdom of God. The triumph of the gospel is most fully seen in the transformation of our bodies. Paul writes that, when this transformation has occurred, then death will have been utterly defeated.

It is important that we understand the significance of death in the great arc of history (or, more properly, salvation history). Adam sins and, as a result of the disobedience of this one man, sin and death enter into the world and all mankind is ruined (Romans 5:12). What then does Paul have in mind when he writes, 'The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law' (v. 56)?

Paul's point is this, death is not simply a natural occurrence, but rather, death is the unnatural consequence of sin. So then, sin is the sting which administers the poison which, in turn, inflicts death. But more than this, sin brings condemnation which is the thing that causes death to be so utterly destructive. This is, I think, why Paul introduces in this parenthesis that 'the power of sin is the law'. Paul observes elsewhere, 'sin is not counted where there is no law' (Romans 5:13), meaning that the law is the thing that makes sin observable and, as such, increases condemnation.

Paul sees, I think, that the sting of death works both ways. Sin leads to death and, therefore, brings death into the world. Sin is also the sting that makes death so utterly horrendous and destructive. For those who refuse to believe and submit to Christ now, death results in condemnation with no further possibility for repentance.

This is why Paul begins this great argument with an explanation of the gospel. It is important that we know that 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Corinthians 15:3). For believers now the effectiveness of death's sting is muted. 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.' (Romans 8:1). In dying for our sins, Christ delivers 'all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery' (Hebrews 2:15). For the believer in Christ, death no longer holds the same kind of fear because we know that death will not lead to condemnation, but rather fellowship with him forever. Consequently, 'the "harmless" death now becomes a genuine and well-founded reality for Christian believers.'<sup>6</sup>

But still, believers suffer, perish and die. Paul understands that with Christ's return, death will be struck the final and fatal blow. The astonishing thing is that this victory will be demonstrated in us. This is why the language of the promised transformation is so significant, the perishable will put on the imperishable and the mortal will put on immortality and, in doing so, the effects and end of sin will be 'swallowed up'.

It is important, as believers, that we understand this. Yes, that day will be a glorious day for those who love him, but that day will be most glorious for him because, in our rescue and transformation, he will utterly vanquish the final enemy and as such will reign utterly supreme with every enemy cast down before him. In this moment we will see the destruction of the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Although our rescue and the redemption of our bodies is purposed to bring him glory, this does not mean that we do not share in the benefits of this great triumph. This is what Paul means when he writes, 'But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 57). Christ gives us the victory because it is we who will be raised from the dead and, in doing so, Christ gives us life eternal. No longer will our bodies perish and no longer will we face death.

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<sup>6</sup>Thiselton, A. C. (2000). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians : A commentary on the Greek text* (1300). Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans.

### **3. WAITING FOR THE GOSPEL TRIUMPH**

#### **1 Corinthians 15:58**

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

##### **a. 'beloved brothers'**

The 'Therefore' signifies that Paul is about to draw an application point from the preceding argument. Note also that Paul's address here is particularly affectionate and only used in one other place (Philippians 4:1). There is an important application point here. Paul is dealing with a difficult, rebellious and deeply critical group of believers who have made the most slanderous and hurtful comments about Paul and Paul rebukes and corrects them in the starkest of terms. Despite this, however, Paul's love for this church runs and remains deep.

Paul understands that these two elements are tightly bound up together. Sometimes we can avoid confrontation and correction in the name of love and sometimes we can correct and rebuke in a way which is unloving. Both responses are dangerous and deeply harmful. Paul understands that the true heart motivated by love for one's brothers and sisters will lead us to correct where we see error and fault. This is the spirit (in fact, the Holy Spirit) which motivates Paul.

##### **b. be steadfast and immovable**

I have said in previous weeks that 'right thinking leads to right living' and we now need to ask ourselves how can this be so? The truth is that right thinking about who God is, all that he has done and all that he will do ensures that our perspective on life is correctly orientated. For example, if we have a low view of God, this will inevitably affect the way in which we deal with difficulty and calamity.

Paul explains that a correct understanding of the implications of Christ's resurrection and the promise of our future resurrection will lead us to stand firm. Suddenly death no longer holds the same kind of fear and this strengthens our resolve to hold firm to the gospel, hold firm to truth and hold firm to Christ.

Christians are called to be 'steadfast and immovable'.

##### **c. always abounding in the work of the Lord**

Paul observed earlier in the passage that the grace of God working in him and through him caused him to work harder than any of the other Apostles (1 Corinthians 15:10). Paul, I think, has a similar idea in view here.

Christians who understand all that God has done and has for them necessarily work hard. This is the true and appropriate response to grace. When we see, receive and experience the grace of God, we respond.

And the great encouragement is this, the work undertaken by the believer is never in vain because it results in God receiving glory and the outcome in our lives is that we come to resemble him.

And so we return full circle to Paul's opening exhortation,



Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you— unless you believed in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:1-2)

The gospel is true, verifiably so, but more than this, it is *truth* and, as such, it requires our unswerving allegiance. Paul calls us to receive, stand, hold fast and, yes, work.

We work because of what he has done. We work that he might be seen in us. We work that he might be most glorified.

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