**A Christian’s Experience After Death**

**Luke 23:32-43; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (ESV)**

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Today we continue the third message of our five-part series answering the question, “What happens after we die?” I want to give you a reminder that this series will raise questions that we don’t have time to answer on Sunday. So we encourage you to look in our Library, to ask one of the leaders here, or even to look at our website and click the link and you’ll be given a page with great audio resources. What happens after we die? In Luke 23, we now turn to the question: What happens to God’s people right after they die?

***32*** *Two others who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.* ***33*** *And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.* ***34*** *And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments.* ***35*** *And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”* ***36*** *The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine* ***37*** *and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”* ***38*** *There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”*

***39*** *One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”* ***40*** *But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?* ***41*** *And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”* ***42*** *And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* ***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

He was a man without fear of God. He knew about the Bible. As an only child, there was no escaping his mother’s lessons about Scripture and about prayer and about God. But that didn’t mean he liked it. At age seven, his mother died of tuberculosis. What little religion he had stomached from her to that point, he soon completely renounced. His care was transferred to his father; a merchant navy captain who took him on six voyages, beginning at age 11. He was fired from his first job due to “unsettled behavior and impatience of restraint.” He had a rebellious spirit that even the royal navy could not tame. He tried to desert, but he was caught, cuffed, and flogged. Yet even this did not purge his insubordination. It only got worse. His freethinking style and fleshly desires helped him manipulate his superiors into discharging him to a ship of degenerates to realize his dreams of moral abandon. He then went on to work as a mate and captain on numerous other vessels, profiting off of one thing: the trade of slaves. He was rude, prideful, immoral, and debauched; with a mouth of profanity that made other traders blush. By his own admission, he intentionally “…sinned with a high hand” and made it his “…study to tempt and seduce others.” He knew about the Bible and he hated it. When it came to the idea of God, he was a man without fear.

Before us lies the darkest day in human history! Never was a day more unjust. The only innocent man who ever lived was being punished for the sins of the world. Almost everyone present was laughing. There was a mock trial, lying witnesses, a false verdict, torture and scorn all heaped upon the most important and righteous man of all time. It was a day when people literally spat in the face of God, and did so without any fear.

On April 8, 1966, *Time* magazine produced perhaps its most famous cover. It was a black background with three simple words in red: “Is God dead?” It signaled the beginning of an era of new hostility toward the historic idea of a creator. It was an era of increasing ignorance and defiance againstwhat is taught about Him in the Bible. You don’t have to look hard to find people who don’t fear God. There’s no name more profaned, no individual suffering as the butt of more jokes. He is openly blasphemed and it is done with scorn to the Person of God. The world is without fear. But that doesn’t mean that they live a life free of dread. Because for all of man’s mockery of religion and the Bible, we are continually confronted by one inescapable reality: death. It’s an idea that strikes terror into hearts.

In 2011, Larry King hosted seven celebrities for dinner at his home to discuss any topic that they wanted. They joked about many, but eventually landed on the idea of death. And one actor who had recently lost his mother to cancer, asked King, “Are you obsessed with your own mortality, like I am?" King’s response was “Oh I fear death. Death’s my biggest fear.” It’s a fear so great in fact, that he said he plans to have himself frozen after death in hopes of a future technology to bring him back to life. But he’s not alone. In 2013, Google launched a new company led by the chairman of Apple that’s chief goal was to extend lives and hopefully solve the problem of death. The world may not fear God, but when it comes to dying, many are rightly terrified. Although if the Bible is true, most are not scared enough!

Last week we looked at what God says happens to His enemies; for those who have no respect or reverence for Him, whether they are outside the church or inside. These are people who live as if they’re fine on their own, who believe they have merit on which they can stand, but the outcome is eternal torment. This is not a message of some no-name fanatic. This was straight from Jesus. To everyone who lacks a fear of God, He sounds the alarm. It’s an alarm intended to awaken within us a fear. It’s not comfortable, but that’s His goal. Fear! It is a gift from God. It’s an opportunity for people without respect for God to reconsider and wake up to see what He does.

Now if you think about death, and last week’s message caused you to be slightly afraid, and you say, “Is there any hope for me?” this is a great place to be. It’s actually where God wants you, because the fear that Jesus intends to awaken is not a hopeless terror. It’s not the dread of mere awareness, the kind that causes demons to tremble. This is a fear that brings us to Him for help. It’s a faith-inspiring fear that clings to one simple word: grace. These are people who don’t trust themselves at all. They are people who say, “I have nothing to bring to God. I can’t stand on any merit of my own. Before this holy and perfect God, I plead for one thing, the gift of grace.” These are the followers of Jesus, God’s people, the ones who fear Him. What happens to them after they die? Well, the truth from today’s text that we’ll spend time unpacking this morning is this: The same grace that awakens us to fear is the grace that brings us home.

The only people who truly escape fear in death are those who embrace it in life. The person with peace is the one whose God-given fear has driven them to faith—a belief in God’s grace. That’s why His people can face death without dread. It’s because they have a righteous, a healthy fear. And the same grace that awakened that fear leading to faith is the grace that brings them home. And to carry that point forward, let’s look at four different reactions to the concept of fear. There are four reactions that revolve around an event: a thief, a vow and a vision.

**Reaction #1: Fear Reviled—The Spectacle of Defiance (Luke 23:32-39)**

Reviled! That means it’s hated, it’s mocked, it’s rejected. Here in the evil event of the crucifixion, we see the fear of God’s plan stubbornly reviled by almost everyone with a passionate fervor. This is a scene that is void of all healthy fear. It’s utterly lacking any respect for God and His plan. It’s the ugliness of unbelief. They’re reviling in a scene that showcases what we might call the shameful spectacle of fallen defiance. It’s the crucifixion. God’s plan is stubbornly reviled and all we can do is look on in horror.

In December of last year, one man in the Eastern Indian state of Orissa was walking home from the local village. And he stumbled upon something unique. A wild elephant had wandered into town. A crowd had gathered and they were playing games with it; taunting, teasing provoking this elephant in a spectacle. They were disregarding how huge it is and how dangerous it is. But the game was too fun and the man wanted to join in. He jumped toward the elephant to take a selfie and he was snatched up by his trunk and crushed to death. There’s a growing concern of individuals dying from taunting and provoking animals. In Africa, when we were there, there were tourists who got out of their vehicle to take pictures petting lions. And it’s almost like we’re watching this kind of scene in verses 32-39.

It’s a shameful spectacle; this event where everyone is provoking and taunting a man who claimed not only to be king, but God. It’s a claim that they scoff at. They don’t fear Him. They revile that thought. They don’t treat Him like a threat. To them, He’s like the stuffed bear in Thirty-Thirty. He’s not real. We can’t really hurt Him. They’re convinced His claims aren’t true. But when we watch, we realize they are like kids who are taunting what they believe to be a stuffed bear that we know is actually alive. It’s horrifying! They think they’re executing a criminal, but they’re actually crucifying the creator-king. He’s suffered their mock trial, been beaten and ridiculed, sentenced to execution, and now it’s in motion. It’s a shameful spectacle where God’s plan and the fear of it is reviled. And here are seven aspects of this spectacle for us to just abhor. These are seven observations that make the defiance so abhorrent. First, it’s just wrong. Look at the shame of His disgraced placement here.

***32*** *Two others who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him.* ***33*** *And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.*

After a biased trial and unjust sentence, He is followed by a mob and marched

to a public place known for death called the Skull. It’s a hill in clear view to all spectators as a warning sign of shame. Luke is writing to readers who are familiar with crucifixion, so he doesn’t include the gory details of what happens. But Jesus, to be sure, is deformed by beatings, shredded from whippings, and displayed for all to revile. It’s total humiliation. It’s worse than anything we see today in the media. It’s a public shaming without any defense, fully unleashed on a man wrongly accused. And when there should be weeping, there is laughing. The one who deserved a coronation as king, instead suffered crucifixion as a criminal, paraded with two other convicts. It was blatantly wrong. Second, it’s cold. Look at the shame of His callous captors.

***34*** *And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments.*

To this merciful king, the crowd is merciless. Instead of the standard cries of criminals of revenge and threat, Jesus asks for their forgiveness. And they hurl at Him abuse, insults, taunts, and they’re callous. It’s a fulfillment of Psalm 22. They’re just worried about who gets His clothes. And it’s a reminder that Jesus is naked. He’s bearing the shame of our sin from Genesis 3 and asking for forgiveness.

**1 Peter 2:23** When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

He has compassion, but they’re callous. It’s cold. And this spectacle is also cowardly. Look at the shame of the stagnant people in verse 35.

***35*** *And the people stood by, watching…*

They just stand by watching. Perhaps some have sympathy, but certainly no advocacy. They won’t do anything about it. They won’t stand up for their king. It’s cowardly. And the rest of verse 35 proves the whole spectacle has been very calculated. Look at Jesus’ scoffing opponents.

***35*** *And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!”*

The rulers turn up their noses. They treat Him with contempt. They’re certain He’s cursed, like Deuteronomy 21:23 says, and that He’s cursed by God, hanging on that tree. They’re sarcastically taunting Him completely unaware that if He were to save Himself and come down, they would be condemned forever. They reviled the fact that this could be God’s plan.

**2 Corinthians 5:21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This plan to them is something to be reviled. 1 Corinthians 2:8 tells us that

**1 Corinthians 2:8** None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

But their hearts were hardened. The spectacle is calculated by them and it’s cruel. Look at his scornful prison guards.

***36*** *The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine* ***37*** *and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!”*

They’re joining in the fun. They think even for a people so irrelevant as Israel, this man is a pitiful excuse for a king. “Let’s make a game of it.” They mock grovel before Him, offering Him a drink of water, egg and vinegar intended to prolong suffering and challenging Him to prove His rule. Save Himself! It’s a sick satire. And on His head, they put a crown of thorns. It’s cruel. The entire event is ironic. Look at the sarcastic inscription in verse 38.

***38*** *There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”*

This is the ultimate irony. His real title is displayed for the world, but is reviled as untrue by all. It’s ironic and ultimately tragic. It’s tragic because all these people are in desperate need of salvation. They’re reviling their only hope. And you can see it perhaps no more starkly than in verse 39. As the insults occur in descending dignity from leaders to soldiers, now to His fellow convict,

***39*** *One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”*

This is a man with hardly any breath left, and he’s using it to blaspheme his only hope. And in Matthew 27 and Mark 15, we’re told that it wasn’t just one criminal, but both. Both thieves were reviling Him in the same way. The irony is that the only way they could be saved was by Jesus doing what He was doing. This is the plan of God and everyone reviled it; this plan that a man would give His life to save them from death. The innocent was punished as if He were guilty. This is God’s design and Luke has been clear. Jesus said

**Luke 9:22** saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

**Luke 17:25** But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

**Luke 24:7** that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.

And this is what he repeated in Luke 24.

**Luke 24:26** Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?

**Luke 24:46** and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead,

This is God’s plan, but it’s reviled by all because as Romans 3:18 says,

**Romans 3:18** There is no fear of God before their eyes.

We can be sure this reviling is inspired by Satan as a temptation. If you remember in Luke 4, Jesus was in the wilderness tempted by the devil and what line did he keep repeating? “If you are the Son of God... If you are the Son of God… Prove it! Make it better for yourself. It’s one thing to suffer when you have no choice. It’s another thing to endure when you can end it in an instant.” This is the ultimate temptation, and yet Jesus follows God. This is a shameless spectacle that is wrong, cold, cowardly, calculated, cruel, ironic, and tragic.

Last week we discovered that following Jesus means we need repentance. It’s a turning. Repentance is a change in mind that leads to a change in action. We considered what it means to be a Christian. A follower of Jesus is to turn from this kind of fearless unbelief. We turn away from unbelief. And when God’s plan is reviled without fear by them and by others, whether it’s friends or films or family, we look on with horror. And our response is to abhor that kind of shame, but we also follow Jesus’ example and we pray. And we do so appalled by the reality that when we sin it is that kind of arrogant contempt for God and His plan that rests in our hearts. Fear is reviled and we should be horrified! But that doesn’t mean God isn’t working. In the midst of this spectacle, it’s not beyond His power to work a miracle. After fear is reviled, it’s realized.

**Reaction #2: Fear Realized—The Miracle of Reverence (Luke 23:40-42)**

Amidst all those who without fear are laughing and mocking God’s plan, a fear of God is suddenly realized. It is perceived. It’s understood not by all, but by one. In this event of the crucifixion where the fear of God’s plan is stubbornly reviled by almost everyone with a passionate fervor, a fear of God’s holiness is suddenly realized by a pitiful thief through divine faith. The story turns from unbelief, to faith. It’s a realization of who God is and what is happening. Now we get to witness the supernatural miracle of genuine reverence. It’s a fear suddenly realized by this convict.

I don’t remember where the bouncy ball came from. It was one of those little rubbery ones you get as a party favor from Chuck E Cheese. My brothers and I were playing with it outside, trying to bounce it as high as we could. We were picking it up and hurling it down. My younger brother was little at the time; 4 or 5. He could chase, he could watch, but he couldn’t catch. We were bouncing, and one bounce of the ball got really high. It came down and launched right up into his open eye. He didn’t stop screaming until we were sitting in Prompt Care. To us, he seemed fine and there was no sign of damage. The doctor did something I’ll never forget. He dropped a solution into his eye. Then he turned the lights off and he pulled out a big magnifying glass with a special UV light that was purple. He flipped that switch, and we all experienced a sudden realization of the desperate reality. My brother’s little eye had a gruesome slice from top to bottom across his entire iris. We were all like, “Oh man!” The doctor sent us off saying it would heal eventually, but he had to prescribe a temporary eye patch and he gave a prescription for some ice cream as consolation for suffering me as his older brother. (Laughter!)

It’s this kind of solution and UV light process that investigators use to reveal the details of a crime scene or dermatologists even, to reveal what appears to be healthy skin, to be exposed as gruesome. And it’s what one doctor calls the “inner zombie.” It’s the damage from the sun that we can’t see with our natural eye and it’s the dawning of clarity that comes about as a sudden realization. And this is kind of what the miracle of faith is like. This sudden realization of what was invisible before, the thief now experiences. Whether it was the words of Jesus, this prayer of forgiveness that flipped on the light or something else, he immediately stops the insults and he sees what is going on and the reality of his situation and the horror of it. And it’s as if God answers Jesus’ prayer in part and a miracle awakens this thief to fear and faith. We’re going to explore a few components of this faith. First, it’s powerful. He speaks, and he does so in verse 40 with a strong conviction. One convict continues to rail at Jesus

***40*** *But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?*

It’s as if he suddenly recognizes who Jesus is, and who they are before God. He’s crystal clear in his senses. He fears judgment. And he has a strong conviction that their punishment won’t end in death, but they have to answer for their crimes to God. It’s a reminder of Luke 12:4 where it says

**Luke 12:4–5** “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!

The thief embodies this and the pain of the cross is overshadowed by a strong conviction and fear of God. It’s powerful, but it’s also humble. The thief makes a clear confession about his guilt and Jesus’ innocence.

***41*** *And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”*

He makes no excuses. There’s no blame-shifting. It’s a humble and clear confession based on a strong conviction that God is to be feared; that he is guilty and that God is good. It’s a faith that is powerful, humble, and third, it is hopeful. He makes a bold petition and throws himself completely on the Person of Jesus.

***42*** *And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

This is one of the few times that the Savior is not called “Lord,” not “Sir,” not “Teacher,” but by His personal name—Jesus. And this thief is not pleading for comfort or earthly deliverance. He’s just thinking about the life to come. “Remember me…” The basis of his request is the belief that Jesus is king, that it actually is all true, that He’s going to reign in a kingdom. By the miracle of God, this man saw the truth. God woke within him a fear-inspired faith that was powerful, humble, and hopeful. He was trusting in no merit of his own. It’s like the tax collector in Luke 18:13.

**Luke 18:13** But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

This is the kind of man who is justified, Jesus said. It’s the man who suddenly realizes fear and true faith. Salvation is not based on our own righteousness or even the feeling of our assurance, but it’s based on where our trust is placed. It’s not in self, not in parents, not in others, but in Jesus. And this thief suddenly realizes the fear of God’s holiness. He decides that his only hope is to powerfully, humbly, and hopefully cast his faith onto Him. To follow Jesus means repentance. It’s turning from unbelief. The way to turn, how it happens, is through the miracle of faith. And this can inspire us to step out with a faith of our own. It’s a faith that we can follow. It’s powerful, humble, hopeful. It’s a fear that is realized about God.

**Reaction #3: Fear Relieved—The Scandal of Benevolence (Luke 23:43)**

This is the epitome of solace. The fear of God’s wrath, that dread, totally disappears. It is sovereignly relieved by a forgiving Savior through a shocking vow. It’s a vow that is a scandal. It’s a surprising scandal of divine benevolence. This vow is worth savoring and it just causes us to stand back in awe.

Ries Jansen was a small man with dark hair. In 1945, he lived in the Netherlands and was a well-known murderer. He was a man-hunter. He had been part of a group of the police that was in charge of collecting deported Jews. Eventually, he was responsible for the death of at least thirty individuals. And then after that, he would go on to subject others to cruel torture. And when the Netherlands were liberated, he was imprisoned. He tried to escape. He tried to find refuge. He tried to excuse his actions, but all his attempts were futile. He was sentenced to death. And the mother of one of his victims read about his fate in the newspaper. She sent him a Bible and a letter. She said she forgave him and she called him to seek refuge in Christ. And as a result, he is said to have repented and to have cried out at his death saying, “Jesus, thy propitiating death is the resting place of my heart.” He said, “Yes Lord Jesus, I’m coming.”

The idea of forgiveness for such a man is scandalous. We don’t know anyone’s heart, but we ask, “Is it possible?” Is it possible that a man like him, or possible that a persecutor like Paul could be forgiven? If a scandal like that is possible, if it is possible for someone as evil as me to be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven, then there is no doubt it is possible for all of us. This gift of grace, scandalous relief, needs to be savored. It’s all packed into verse 43. Here are six elements of this vow for us to savor. First, it is sure. Look at the shock of His sheer certainty here.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly,…*

This is the sixth time Jesus uses this phrase. It means “totally certain; sure.” It’s final. It’s a vow of sovereign authority.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly, I say…*

This is Jesus saying it. It’s special. Look at the shock of specific intimacy.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you,…*

It’s a special vow Jesus makes to a person of faith. Here, it’s to a thief. “I say to you…” It’s swift, instant, immediate. Look at the shock of sudden reality.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today…*

It’s instant and conscious. “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” This was after only a few moments of believing in Jesus. There was no time to earn his way, to prove his worth. This is the grace of God. “Today!” He doesn’t need to be baptized. He’s not going to sleep. And he’s certainly not going to any human-invented place called purgatory. “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Now, the Greek doesn’t have punctuation. You may encounter some people who say that the comma is in the wrong place. They say instead of reading like it does now, “Truly, I say to you, comma, today you will be with me in Paradise,” they argue that it should read, “Truly, I say to you today, comma, you will be with me in Paradise.” They’re uncertain as to when it will happen. But the majority view and the conventional Greek word order are clear. All the main translations prove that the word “today” describes not the time He’s saying the vow, but when it will take place. It means today! It’s not a progression. It’s a declaration. The only way this is possible is by salvation through faith by grace. You can be saved at any moment. When God says, “Today is the acceptable time. Today is the day of salvation,” (2 Corinthians 6:2) it can happen today!

**Ephesians 2:8–9** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

**Romans 5:1** Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

**Romans 8:1** There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This is a swift vow. And it’s together. Look at the stunning community.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me…*

This is possible because of what Jesus is doing. He is paying for his sins. Jesus is suffering the wrath of God on his behalf until it is satisfied. So when Jesus says “It is finished,” that means it’s done. When Jesus cries

**Luke 23:46** Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

Jesus goes to be with God and the thief who dies a few moments later, is together with Him. This is why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5

**2 Corinthians 5:6** So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord,

And Philippians 1:21 says

**Philippians 1:21–23** For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

In one sense, we’re brought closer to Jesus at death. And if that’s not true, Paul says

**1 Corinthians 15:19** If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

That’s a pathetic hope. But it is true. And he claims we have a guarantee, actually.

**2 Corinthians 5:5** He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

This promise is sure, final, special, swift. It’s a together kind of promise. And it will be awesome and great. Look at the supreme imagery.

***43*** *And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

This is how Jesus describes the present heaven for God’s people. It’s a Persian word describing the walled garden of a king, the place where he enjoys communion. It’s a place that Jesus mentions in Revelation 2:7.

**Revelation 2:7** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

It’s that same tree that is in His kingdom by the river in Revelation 22:2. It’s a hint back to the Garden of Eden. In Luke chapter 4, Luke traces the genealogy of Jesus all the way back to Adam not by paternity of blood, but by blood right to the throne. And the paradise that Adam lost, Jesus reclaims. Where Adam failed in temptation, now Jesus succeeds.

**Romans 5:18-19** Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

**1 Corinthians 15:22** For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

**1 Peter 3:18** For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,

This all fulfills what was prophesied in Isaiah 53.

**Isaiah 53:4–6** Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

**Isaiah 53:11** Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

This is how the audacious appeal by a convict could be followed by such an audacious vow from Jesus. And it’s why the sun was darkened and why temple veil was torn in two and why the centurion could praise God saying,

**Luke 23:47** Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!”

And it’s because of this vow that the thief’s fears could be relieved. To follow Jesus means to repent, to turn from unbelief. And the way to turn, how it happens, is through the miracle of faith. And this faith brings a gift that’s enjoyed, which is grace. It’s freedom from wrath. It’s a forgiveness that is free, but not cheap. It had to be bought with the blood of God’s own Son. And in the face of this death, I imagine the anthem of this convict and of Ries Jansen, and even of our own hearts would be this precious song we call *In Christ Alone*. In Christ alone my hope is found. The song says

*No guilt in life, no fear in death*

*This is the pow'r of Christ in me*

*From life's first cry to final breath,*

*Jesus commands my destiny.*

*No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man,*

*Can ever pluck me from His hand*

*'Til He returns or calls me home*

*Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.*

Fear relieved! It’s reviled, realized, relieved, and fourth

**Reaction #4: Fear Refined—The Obstacles to Perseverance (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)**

God’s holiness is suddenly realized and any dread of His wrath is sovereignly relieved, but that doesn’t mean our experience of fear utterly disappears. A healthy fear of God’s ways still continues. And it does so in a way that is strategically refined. It’s directed in a healthy way that God desires. We see that the fear of God’s ways through His Son is strategically refined for an unusual benefit, through a mysterious vision. This is a vision for us to behold. And it helps refine our fear into a trust that empowers us to hold fast to God.

In 1834, a crew was coasting through calm waters when their captain, John Clute, fell ill. After a few days of sickness, a doctor said “There’s no use. He’s a dead man,” and pronounced him deceased. They prepared his body for burial and placed him in a wooden coffin. The pallbearers were preparing to place it out to sea, and then they heard movement and a groan from inside the casket. They opened it just in time to hear the captain cry, “Get me out of here! Are you mad?” They helped him out, and he started speaking of a supernatural experience. He later would say, “It then seemed to me I died and heaven was opened and then I saw more human beings soaring through one another so happy.” John Clute had quite a vision. In fact, some might use it as proof of an after-life, or at the very least, proof to Captain Clute. Only that’s not necessarily what he thought. He would later say, “I did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ nor do I yet.” When it came to his need for a Savior, his vision did nothing at all to persuade him.

As wonderful as the thought of heavenly visions might be, they are limited in their

capacity for true spiritual impact. There are certain obstacles that such a vision cannot overpower. And to explain that, we have someone who actually went to heaven and came back. And this morning, we’re going to hear what he said. His account is recorded in the midst of an impassioned letter to a church at Corinth. It was the latest in a series of messages the Apostle Paul had written, but this one was charged with emotion. His concern was intense because the church was under attack by false apostles that were challenging his authority and teaching. And by doing so, they were undermining the very message of Jesus. So Paul was reduced to defending himself in writing against these false claims. It was a necessary task that he had to do out of obligation and passion for the supremacy of Jesus. So he’s forced to use this letter to prove that when it comes to these so-called apostles, he is superior. And so in 2 Corinthians chapters 11 and 12, Paul proves he’s superior in terms of his ancestry.

**2 Corinthians 11:22** Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.

And in verses 23-27, he proves he is superior in terms of his suffering.

**2 Corinthians 11:23-27** Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

And he proves he’s superior in terms of his sympathy.

**2 Corinthians 11:28-29** And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

He has great sympathy. And he’s superior to them in terms of his preservation.

**2 Corinthians 11:30-33** If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Then fifth, in chapter 12, and here is where we are interested. I would encourage you to turn there. In 2 Corinthians chapter 12 he proves he is superior in terms of the supernatural. In chapter 12, he describes a vision of heaven. Paul experienced many visions, six of which are recorded in Acts, but this one was special. And yet it was distasteful for Paul to bring up. He doesn’t like to mention it because he argues that visions in a sense, are unprofitable because they’re unverifiable, they’re unrepeatable, and they’re not fully comprehensible. And as wonderful as this was, it was limited. It didn’t earn him a life of perfect ease. His life still required trust and faith because this vision still was unable to overcome three significant obstacles. These obstacles remind us of the limits of visions of heaven and the remaining need for a refined fear in this life. So here are three obstacles to remember.

First, this vision is not able to overcome the heavenly mystery. The reality of paradise is fixed and it’s a secret. It’s a surprise that God is not going to let anyone ruin. Listen to Paul explain the limits here of his experience.

***1*** *I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.* ***2*** *I know a man in Christ…*

He distances himself and talks about himself in the third person.

*…who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—*

What does he mean by that? Well, in Scripture, the first heaven is the sky or upper atmosphere. The second is interstellar space, the heavens beyond. But the third heaven, the heaven of heavens, the highest heaven is where God dwells. It’s a place called Paradise. Paul says, “I went there.”

*…whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.* ***3*** *And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—****4*** *and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.*

You say, “Paul went there? That’s awesome! What did he say about it?” Not much! Was it a real place? Yes. Was Paul there in body or just in spirit? He’s clear. “I don’t really know. It’s hard to say.” But it was so real that he couldn’t rule that out. He was conscious of the transfer. He wasn’t clear exactly how it happened, but he heard words. And he implies that his body could have gone there just as much as his spirit. I mean, he doesn’t really know. There’s not much to share because this is just not possible, he says. It’s a secret. And that’s someone who has truly been to heaven. God’s not going to let him ruin the surprise. It’s a secret. And this vision, as great as it is, it can’t overcome that heavenly mystery. But second, Paul explains that we’re weak. And this vision can’t overcome the obstacle of our human vulnerability. As great as this vision is, we’re feeble and sinful.

And he describes what happens in verse 7. He’s prone to pride because of this. Paul is not talking, but we can deduce this about Paradise. Even after all that Paul has suffered, even after all the shipwrecks and the beatings and the stoning, he got one glimpse of Paradise and he got so excited that God had to give him an intense thorn just to keep him from exploding in joy.

***7*** *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.*

This vision was great! It was so great in fact, that it tempted him to get conceited. And it couldn’t overcome his weakness as a sinner, his human vulnerability. And so God actually had to permit that he would have a thorn in the flesh. And we’re not sure exactly what that is. There’s different thoughts about it. It doesn’t matter entirely right now. Right now, what matters is that it was very painful. And so third, his vision, he realized that it doesn’t overcome the obstacle of human dependency. You see, this was a secret; heaven. And Paul was weak. And because of that, he was tempted to be proud about knowing that secret. But to keep him from being lured into that pride, he’s taught that God chooses to work through weakness.

***8*** *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.* ***9*** *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* ***10*** *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

What is sufficient for Paul? The vision is not going to carry him forward. The vision is not going to change his life into a life of ease. What is sufficient for him is grace. It’s grace enough to carry us after death and grace enough to sustain us in life. It’s grace!

Charles Spurgeon used to speak of a fish who was afraid that when he was in the ocean he was drinking so much that he might drink the ocean dry. Or a mountain climber who climbed Mount Everest and might be afraid that he would breathe the air of the atmosphere and there wouldn’t be any left. And it’s as if God is saying, “It’s okay. Drink up. Breathe. You’re fine. When it comes to My grace, there is plenty. It’s enough. It’s sufficient.” You see, the best part of all this is that the vision is not an elimination of weakness. But actually, the weakness increases and it’s a provision of sufficient grace in the midst of it. The vision didn’t solve anything. It was encouragement. It was necessary for proving his superiority, but it was limited. It was unable to overcome these obstacles. 2 Corinthians 5:7 is clear.

**2 Corinthians 5:7** for we walk by faith, not by sight.

At the end of the day, when we talk about heaven, where we’re going to go if we follow Jesus, any vision of what it might be like is incredibly limited. And for one of the few who have been there, Paul claims that it’s pretty unprofitable, unverifiable, unrepeatable. It’s not comprehensible. The real focus should not be searching for new revelations, but trusting the ones we’ve already been given. And the message from a few verses later in 2 Corinthians 5:20 is

**2 Corinthians 5:20–21** Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Even a vision from heaven can’t guarantee a life of ease. And our fears may be relieved, but that doesn’t mean they don’t need to be refined so that we continue to seek the grace that would sustain us through the trials we face in life until we reach that place one day.

To follow Jesus means repentance. It’s a turning from unbelief. And the way to turn, how it happens, is through the miracle of faith. And the gift that is enjoyed by those who turn is grace. But the grace doesn’t mean a life of ease. We need perseverance. Our fear of wrath may be relieved, but our fear of God’s Son needs to be refined so that we hold fast to His promise.

What Christians experience immediately after death as they await the new heavens and the new earth, is Paradise. That’s what we trust in. Christians are people who turn fromunbelief, tofaith, bygrace in, not ease, but trust. The only way to a death-without-fearis a life in which fear is embraced. You see, an afterlife without dread is possible. And God awakens within us a righteous fear, the kind that moves us to faith. And that same grace that awakens that fear is the grace through which fears are relieved; the grace that brings us home.

He was a man with no fear of God. He knew about the Bible and he hated it. He was relentless in the pursuit of his own immoral freedom and reckless in his disregard for the freedom of others. But one day, his ship entered a storm. It was a tempest so severe that he thought he might perish and thoughts of death began to surface. He remembered a verse from the Bible. Proverbs 1,

**Proverbs 1:20–28** Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me.

These alarming words graciously woke John Newton to a healthy fear of God. It was a fear that would move him to faith, that compelled him to follow Jesus, and left him disgusted with the slave trade. He joined the effort to abolish it one day. And eventually, at the age of 39, he began a 43 year ministry of preaching the good news about Jesus. He lived to be 82, and would amaze his friends even then by saying “My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.” When he was a minister of that small congregation, he would write weekly hymns for the people to sing, filled with precious truths from this man who called himself the “African blasphemer.” And one of the wonders he would celebrate was in the words of one of his best known songs.

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,*

*That saved a wretch; like me!*

*I once was lost, but now am found,*

*Was blind, but now I see.*

*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,*

*And grace my fears relieved;*

*How precious did that grace appear*

*The hour I first believed!*

What happens after we die? Well, we learned that people will spend eternity exactly where they belong. We also learned that our fate after death hinges not on what we feel, but on what God says. And today we learned that the same grace that awakens that God-fearing faith is the grace that brings us all the way home.

Now we ask: What about this life that we live? If grace secures us in heaven and we’re all looking forward to this future resurrection, why should we care about what we do now? Does it really matter? And for the next two weeks Pastor Ritch will be back to clear up all the confusion I’ve caused (Laughter!) and to explain from Revelation 20 why God’s people and His enemies both await a judgment after death that gives incredible meaning to every single thing we do in life.