

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds: The End of life's Journey

It was on December 21, 1807, that John Newton, the author of "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds", fell asleep in Jesus. He was eighty-three years of age. Some of his last words were spoken to William Jay of Bath and included: "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things - that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour." The hymn mentioned before reveals that he had a pressing desire to see the Lord Jesus Christ where He is - in Glory!

The last two verses state:

*"Weak is the effort of our heart,
And cold our warmest thought;
But when we see Thee as Thou art,
We'll praise Thee as we ought.*

*Till then we would Thy love proclaim
With every fleeting breath;
And triumph in that blessed Name
Which quells the power of death."*

In the first of these two verses, we find our failure to apprehend the greatness of the Lord whom we seek to praise. Our hearts, representative of our affections and will, are so often slow to come into His presence and praise Him whether on a personal and private basis, or on the more public level of fellowship in our local church.

Then, again, our thoughts toward Him are so often cold. We may find that we know a good deal about Him, but without knowing Him intimately. I recall a preacher on the Cornhill in Ipswich crying out, "The Lord knoweth them that are His!" A Christian lady, who was passing by at that specific moment, turned round and approached him. To the encouragement of the speaker, she whispered, "And He knows them through and through!" Oh, that we knew the Lord Jesus in a similar way! Our thoughts and hearts would then burn within us as they did in the two disciples on the way to Emmaus so long ago (Luke 24). Even so, the hymn-writer indicates that we cannot praise Him perfectly until that day when we meet Him face to face.

In the last verse of his hymn, we are made to consider our lives while left here on earth. Newton encourages us to boast in the love of Christ and in His name.

Hence, in our talk today, we will examine:

- How and when we shall see the Lord Jesus as He is;
- Why we will praise Him;
- How and to whom we may proclaim His love; and
- How the power of death has been crushed.

How and when shall we see Jesus as He is?

We have just heard of John Newton "falling asleep in Jesus" about two hundred years ago. Does this mean that he has been asleep for all that time? No! It means that his body has been asleep because physical death is a separation of body, soul and spirit. The body may turn to the dust from which it was formed originally, but the soul and the spirit live on and shall, in resurrection, be united with a new body.

In 2 Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul describes our earthly bodies as "tabernacles" or "tents". They are the temporary dwelling places for our souls and spirits. Owing to the weaknesses and mortality of these earthly bodies, we are subjected to hardship. In simple terms, our souls and spirits are considered to be our "selves". These groan within our bodies - like prisoners in a cell - as they anticipate the freedom to be given by the new body. Paul speaks of this new body as an eternal house for us in the heavens. That is to say, an ever-living body in which we will take up permanent residence in a day to come.

As one who had trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ, John Newton is alive and well! We can say this on the authority of the Son of God Himself. In Matthew 22:31-33 we read, "But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." This tells us that, through faith, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are alive and await the day when they shall receive their new bodies. John Newton (along with all those who have died trusting in the living God) await that day.

The question may then be asked, "If John Newton lives, then where is he now?" The answer is found in 2 Corinthians 5:8 where Paul writes, "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." In his state without his body, John Newton is present with the Lord. His desire to be with the Lord has been fulfilled. The apostle Paul speaks more personally in Philippians 1:23 where he says, "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better..." Here, he was making reference to staying on earth for the sake of his fellow Christians or leaving it through death to be with Christ. He emphasises that to be with Christ is far, far better.

Imagine the joy and wonder to be consciously in the presence of Christ Himself. "Consciously?" we hear you say. "Is the soul conscious after death?" The answer to that question is found in the Lord's teaching in Luke 16:19-31. There we find a beggar called Lazarus. He had trusted in God during his life. When he died, he was carried by angels to a place of comfort – at that time, Abraham's bosom. A rich man, who had not trusted in God, died at about the same time. In the unseen world, he found himself in a place of torment. He could see, feel, hear, speak and reason. The teaching of Jesus shows there is no peace for the faithless after death. The tormented man begged to have Lazarus sent back to warn his brothers. He was told that they had the scriptures and that, even if one was sent back from the dead, they would not be persuaded. Furthermore, from this event, we can see that our destiny is determined by the decisions that we make on earth. Are we living for God or living for ourselves?

Queen Victoria loved Prince Albert with all her heart. His death was devastating to her. It is thought that she attended séances in order to hear his voice once more. All to no avail! We can see the reason for this in the Lord's teaching. None are normally allowed to return in any form to speak with those left behind. Are you involved in spiritism or other spirit-seeking cults? The teaching of Christ warns against such an empty occupation. If there are genuine voices heard, or presences felt, then they are not God-given! They are the result of the work of Satanic forces!

Do you remember the words of the Lord Jesus to the dying thief? He said, "Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise." The thief had confessed Jesus as "Lord" and had recognised Him as the Messiah who would soon set up His kingdom. His faith saved him for, that very day, he was to be with Jesus in paradise. The bodies of both Jesus and the thief would be in the grave; yet, both would be alive together in paradise. Often, it has been said of the two thieves that died with Jesus that one thief was lost that none should presume, and one thief was saved so that none need despair.

Paradise is a special garden of delight and joy. There are no words on earth to describe the things uttered there. At a time of persecution, Paul was caught up to the third heaven. 2 Corinthians 12:4 tells us that he was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words, which would not be right for a man to speak. Paul could not tell whether he was in the body or out of it on this occasion. Nonetheless, this shows us that he had all his faculties throughout this extraordinary experience.

Today, Christians live in the hope of the Lord's imminent return. In John 14 Jesus told His disciples that He was going away to prepare a place for them and that He would return for them in a day to come. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 we read of this return: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." It is then that living believers will see Jesus face to face. Hallelujah!

It has been suggested that when He descends from heaven, His shout will encourage all Christians, living and dead, to rise up to be with Him in their new bodies. The voice of the archangel causes all those believers of Hebrew origin to rise to Him; while, the last trump gives the marching orders to all believing Gentiles down through the ages. However, the simple order of events is the dead in Christ shall rise first, then both living and dead go to be with Him. This is further qualified in the words of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 where we read, "Behold, I shew 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 trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

What a wonderful day that will be for all the faithful; but how much more wonderful it will be for God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ to see one of their purposes fulfilled! The hymn writer, Carrie Breck, wrote of this meeting in a hymn called "Face to Face with Christ My Saviour". Verses 3 and 4 read:

*What rejoicing in His presence,
When are banished grief and pain;
When the crooked ways are straightened,
And the dark things shall be plain.*

*Face to face - oh, blissful moment!
Face to face - to see and know;
Face to face with my Redeemer,
Jesus Christ who loves me so.*

Why will we praise Him?

In the New Testament, there are various words that are translated as "praise". For example, in Hebrews 13:15, praise is linked with thanksgiving while, in 1 Peter 4:11, it is linked with giving the credit or honour to God. So we may worship or adore God for His personal worth; but praise Him for all His wonderful acts and greatness. Both are found in Psalm 150:2, which states, "Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness."

If we apply this to the Lord Jesus Christ, then we may praise Him as the Pre-eminent One. He is the Firstborn of all creation, Firstborn from among the dead and Firstborn among many brethren. He is our great God and Saviour and our great High Priest. He is the great Prophet and the great Shepherd. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. How great is our Lord, and greatly to be praised!

We also praise Him for His works. In 1 Chronicles 16:12 we read, "Remember his marvellous works that he hath done, his wonders, and the judgements of his mouth..." Among the works of the Lord Jesus, we can see His power over creation, disease, death and demons. He is the eternal Word who made all things. The Son of the Father's love for whom and by whom all things were created. He was the Man who could still the storm and control the fish of the sea. It was He who could change water into wine. He cleansed the leper and gave sight to the blind. He made the lame to walk and the dumb to talk. He gave life to the daughter of Jairus and raised the widow's son from death. It was He who cast out the demons from Legion and from the tormented boy. He cleansed the temple of corruption and confronted the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. It was not surprising that, in awe of Him, men exclaimed, "What manner of man is this!"

Yet, there was a greater work that had to be done. The work that the Father had given Him to do (John 17). This was the work by which men, women and children could be redeemed. There are two main Greek verbs that are translated "to redeem". The first involves the payment for a slave with a view to setting him or her free. The second speaks of a release on payment of a ransom. We were slaves to sin, so Jesus shed His own blood to save us from it. What a cost! We were in bondage to Satan and death, so Christ gave His life as a ransom to deliver us from them. Hence, the hymn writer, Samuel Sayford, could pen the following verses:

*"Redemption! Oh, wonderful story -
Glad message for you and for me;
That Jesus has purchased our pardon,
And paid all the debt on the tree.*

*From death unto life He has brought us,
And made us by grace sons of God;
A fountain is opened for sinners;
Oh, wash and be cleansed in the blood!"*

The apostle Peter wrote to Christians saying, "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot..." (1 Peter 1:18-20). His, indeed, was the cost - the cross of shame; but our portion is eternal blessing through His precious name!

How and to whom may we proclaim His love?

Returning to the hymn of John Newton, we ask, "How and to whom may we proclaim His love?" Love is the fuel of Christianity. It is the part of the Spirit's fruit that permeates the rest. The Lord Jesus said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35). Where Christians truly love one another in a practical and sacrificial way, then there is a proclamation of Christ and His love to the people of this world. We use the word "sacrificial" because the love of God is a "giving" love. In His love, God gave His only begotten Son in order that people could be saved. While the love of Christ is seen in that He delivered Himself up to death in order that people

could be redeemed. As we have heard, Jesus Himself taught, "...Love one another; as I have loved you..." (John 13:34). Are we prepared to lay down our lives on behalf of fellow Christians? Are we prepared to lay down our lives for those who hate us? Such is the measure of the love of Christ.

Yet, God's love is not only expressed in actions; it is expressed in word. This may be in spoken or written form using the many methods available for communication today. However, the methods used should always glorify God. We say this because the message is to go forth "in the Holy Ghost" (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Yet, love is not only proclaimed to our fellow believers and to the people of the world in general, it is also proclaimed before God. In Ephesians 5:2 we read, "And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour." When love is active and involves sacrifice of one kind or another, then it brings a sweet fragrance to God. It gives Him pleasure to see those He has loved and purchased displaying His nature of love here on earth. Furthermore, Christians are able to express their love for God in worship and adoration. In times that we set aside for prayer, let's remember to include worship as a priority.

How has the power of death has been crushed?

Our last question for consideration is, "How has the power of death has been crushed?" We could say that death has been dealt with in three ways. The first being through the death of Christ. Hebrews 2:14-15 states, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." Here we find that Christ has disarmed Satan. The devil's weapon used to be the power of death. This was God's decreed punishment for sin. But the Lord Jesus has exhausted God's judgment against sin and vanquished death by rising again. Therefore, the power of the devil is annulled and Christ now holds the keys of Hades and death.

The second way in which death has been banished is through the immortal bodies given to believers. In 1 Corinthians 15, it is revealed that, when believers are taken to be with the Lord, their bodies will be incorruptible, glorious, heavenly, powerful, spiritual and immortal. Death will not be able to touch them. Hence, the apostle Paul can shout that death is swallowed up in victory! It is a victory that is given to believers through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The third way in which death is crushed is in that day when it is cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:13-14) Death is then vanquished completely. This is the final action regarding this world because it ushers in a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness shall dwell. God will live with men on the new earth, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God.

In summary, we can see that John Newton's hymn speaks of the name of Jesus as a fragrant oil poured forth. It tells of His holy, precious worth as the Man who lived a divine life while here on earth. His name is medicine that can heal and restore the fainting spirit. It is the oil that calms the tempestuous trials of life. It is the food that energises our souls to serve. It is the fond embrace where the weary rest. Yet, it is a sure foundation upon which real life may be built. It is a place of refuge for the tortured soul. It is the storehouse of God's blessing and favour. It reveals that He is worthy in every way - the fairest of all to our souls. It shows us that His work is perfect in every respect. He, therefore, merits all the praise that we can muster until that day when we are with Him and like Him.

Let's finish with a verse of Newton's hymn that is not often seen. It is found in the Olney collection and says:

*"By Thee my prayers acceptance find,
Although with sin defiled;
Satan accuses me in vain,
And I am owned a child."*

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