

Words of Trust

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[0 : 00] So we'll read from Luke 23 from verse 44. It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

Jesus called out with a loud voice, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, Surely this was a righteous man.

When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching these things.

We're going to take a little while now to think about what we read together in the Gospel of Luke. And the words that Jesus says in the cross there, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

Words of great trust and confidence in God as Jesus faces death, that he can commit himself into the hands of his Father in heaven.

[1 : 23] It is Freedom Sunday. As a church, we're joining with many, many other churches around the world, remembering the work of International Justice Mission, but also remembering especially the suffering of those 40 million people globally who are living in slavery.

On the 23rd of October 2019, a freight container was delivered from Zeebrugge in Belgium to Graze in Essex.

It was then picked up by a truck to be driven away. And in the back, awaiting delivery, were 39 illegal Vietnamese immigrants.

And tragically, heartbreakingly, every single one of them was dead. So it's always important to remember that slavery and trafficking are not just things that happen somewhere else.

These are pictures of these young Vietnamese people who died in the back of that lorry being trafficked. Last week in Scotland, the police broke up a gang of human traffickers, taking people from Romania and trafficking them to the UK, including Scotland.

[2 : 49] So Freedom Sunday is important. We can't ignore what's going on in the world around us. We can't ignore the fact that people are dying as a result of human greed and cruelty.

And as we think about death and the shadow that death casts over so much of human life, this morning, as we're reminded through the words of Jesus that he's the one who bosses death. And he bosses death so that death will not boss us. That Jesus, as he dies, he is giving himself to death in such a way that death no longer will have the same grip on the human heart, the human life.

Jesus faces death here and defeats it. We're told by Paul in the letter to Corinthians, death is swallowed up by victory. I remember when I was a student in Glasgow, I had a good friend who went to a different church from me and we met up through the week and I said, how was your church on Sunday?

And he says, oh man, it was bonkers. He says, my minister, he was talking about all the lovely roses in his garden and how he was walking through his garden smelling these beautiful, lovely, fragrant roses.

[4 : 09] And then he said, I smelled the beautiful roses and my mind thought of death. And his minister had then gone on to talk about death at great length and he thought this was just a bit too much.

But that's where we're going today, hopefully as gently and tactfully and thoughtfully as we can. But there is something really important here, that Jesus faces death.

He bosses death. And in doing so, he helps us to be able to think more clearly and with less fear about death.

Something that obviously hangs over every human being to a greater or lesser extent. Jesus enters death, not as a victim, but as victor.

And that means that if we trust Jesus, we will enter death, not as victim, but as victor. You might not be a Christian today and think, you know, what is the relevance of Christianity to my life?

[5 : 13] None at all. But actually, Christianity gives us a really coherent way to think about life and death, to make sense of who we are, why we're here, and where we're going.

And one thing we all know as human beings is that death does haunt us. And even bereavement and losing people we love is something that's profoundly destructive.

And Christianity helps us to understand, why is it? Why does such loss bring the grief that it does? Why is it that death hangs like a specter in the air over the human species?

And we see that life is precious and life is good and that God values life so much that he comes to give his son Jesus so that in the end, life will triumph over death.

That although we will all die, that beyond death, there is resurrection life for everyone who trusts in Jesus. So let's just be reminded of this then, that Jesus bosses death.

[6 : 29] Now what does he actually say here? He says, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. So there's a cry here and it's a cry to God as Father.

And that tells us this, that at this point in his suffering on the cross, Jesus has been through the worst of it. Earlier in his experience, he cries out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He couldn't even speak to God as Father in that moment. It was a time of utter desolation and abandonment. But that moment of deepest darkness, of most profound suffering, has passed and Jesus is re-emerging into relationship with his Father, energized with hope and trust.

Normal relations between Father and Son are re-established. God is no longer the God of power who finds sin so repugnant that he cannot acknowledge the cry of his sin-bearing son.

Now God is once more the Father who is pleased and delighted with the son that he loves. And when we trust Jesus, we become the children with whom God is pleased and delighted.

[7 : 46] And we are guaranteed his love in all the circumstances of life. So Jesus here, he's come out of the deepest darkness, he's ready to commit himself into the Father's hands and to step in to physical death.

Donald MacLeod, who taught theology here in Edinburgh, says this, he says, as he died, his dawn was already breaking. As he died, his dawn was already breaking.

He'd been through the darkness and he steps into death knowing that he is stepping into the arms of his Father in heaven. He's back with the Father that he loves.

His dawn is already breaking. The words Jesus says, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

Those words I commit, into your hands I commit my spirit, come from Psalm 31.

Psalm 31, I'm told, was used as a bedtime prayer for Jewish children. Into your hands I commit my spirit.

[8 : 56] Deliver me, Lord, my faithful God. That as they went to sleep, this was the prayer they offered to God. And so Jesus is falling asleep into death, so to speak, and he is trusting himself to God.

But be clear, Jesus is in control in this situation. He is bossing death. It's not the other way around. Death does not reach out and grab a reluctant Jesus and enfold him in his clutches.

But Jesus himself approaches death boldly, walks up to give it face-to-face, eyeballing scrutiny. He reaches out to death and takes it into his hand.

He enters into death so that he can disarm it, defeat it, and free you and me from its fear and offer us the resurrection life on the other side.

He swallows death up. So he's entering death not in despair, but trust and total confidence.

Hebrews chapter 2, a letter written and found in the latter part of the Old Testament, says, since the children of flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of death or the power of him who holds the power of death.

[10 : 26] So Jesus frees us from the power of death. That tells us this good news, that the power of death is undone.

What is death then for the believer? What do Christians believe about death? What do Christians think happens when we die?

Well, like Jesus, our body goes to the grave, but our spirit goes to the Father in heaven. The Apostle Paul, later writing in the book of Thessalonians, says this, he's trying to help them understand what's happened to the people they loved who've died.

And he says that death is a falling asleep in the Lord. It's falling asleep and awakening in the arms of the Father. Death, for us, is going to be with our people.

It is to be with Christ. Jesus goes from Golgotha to paradise into the arms of a loving Father. When we die, we too will go to be with Christ to rest in the arms of a loving Father.

[11 : 37] So the Apostle Paul will write, for to me to live is Christ, but to die is gain. That's an incredibly powerful, positive, alternative vision of death, not as the end, but as the beginning.

I think C.S. Lewis sort of spoke about this life as the introduction to our story. and that when we step through death into life with God, that really that's when the story begins.

Psalm 31, then, was the prayer of child, childlike trust in God the Father as little, as little children went to sleep at night.

and it's that same childlike trust that Jesus has in his Father as he gives himself to death. It's not childish.

It's not irrational. It's not foolish. It's not unreasoned. It's a confidence in who God is and what God's like. It's a matter of fact.

[12 : 50] It's undisturbed. It's accepting and happy. It's a prayer that Jesus takes to himself as he passes from life to death.

And it's a prayer that he gifts to you and to me for the moment that we know that death is approaching. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

Because his death opens up for us the presence of God forever. we read that as he died the veil of the temple was torn into a symbolic act. This veil in the temple screened off the most holy place so that people could not draw near into the innermost presence of God.

And when Jesus died and that veil was torn in the temple it was opening the way of access into the innermost presence of God. And so that's what Jesus does in his death as he gives you and I access forever into the innermost presence of the living God.

So Jesus bosses death and I want to encourage you and I then to trust Jesus. Let's be trusting the boss. When I started off in ministry in 1993 Louise, my wife and I we moved to the town of Kirkcaldy.

[14 : 14] I didn't know much about Kirkcaldy and Fife grew. I love it a lot. The Langton is a great place. One of the things I found out before I moved there was that it was the spiritualist capital of Scotland.

Lots of spiritualist churches in Kirkcaldy. More spiritualist churches than evangelical churches. And people were really into spiritualism.

I met a lot of people who were very involved with spiritualism. There was a fascination with the afterlife. With people who had gone before us kind of thing.

And that's not just confined to fifiers. Twilight was a program that was really popular. So vampire stories, the undead, the living dead, zombies, massive film, TV and literature genre.

Or I read this book last year called I Am, I Am, I Am, 17 Brushes with Death. It was written by a woman called Maggie O'Farrell who's a really well-known author, lives locally in the Morningside area and she spoke about 17 near-death experiences that she'd had.

[15 : 33] So people think about this. It touches on all of us. we wonder what will happen when I die? What will it be like in the afterlife? Or what's happened to the person I love who's died?

So it's a real issue and often it's a difficult issue. But Jesus is coming to wipe the mist off the window, to make it less foggy and less scary and less mysterious and to give us some clarity and some hope and some light, light from himself for the future, for all that is to come.

He frees us from the fear of death. That's what we're told in Hebrews chapter 2. Since the children have flesh, he frees those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

So he gives us a freedom from that haunting fear. What does trusting the boss look like?

I'd say this, as we look at Jesus, what does he do? Well, he rests in the love of his father, doesn't he?

[16 : 57] He commits himself in a loving way into the hands of his father in heaven. He rests in the love of the father. So Jesus doesn't die in despair or fear, but in love.

This is a prayer of love, into your hands I commit my spirit. Calling to a father that he loves with his whole being, longing to be with his father again.

No greater joy there is than to be with the father that he loves. And there is no greater joy for the Christian than to be with the savior we love, who gave himself for us.

So that's the Christian understanding here then, that we can rest in the love of the father. There is this loving relationship that we have with God that will endure forever, and we rest in that.

We rest in the power of the Holy Spirit. We're told here that Jesus cries out with a loud voice that has strengthened Jesus as he dies.

[18:04] Why? Is he superhuman? Is he immune to pain? No, we know that his humanity was real, it was like ours. He suffered in really grievous, horrific ways in the cross.

It was draining and shattering. Where is he finding strength? Not in himself, but in the power of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life.

And that same Holy Spirit lives in every Christian. If you were to become a Christian, God says he would come and live in you in the person and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so when the Christian dies, they rest in the love of the Father, but they also rest in the power of the Holy Spirit. Don't depend on your own strength, but depend on his strength.

We rest in our identity as children of the Father. He cries out, Father. And because of Jesus, those of us who trust in him, we can call God Father as well.

[19:11] So he's got a strong positional sense of himself as a son of the Father. His identity is secure in his relationship with God. God. And so we rest in our identity as beloved children or much loved children of the Father in heaven.

What else? Well, we can rest in the promises of the Bible, can't we? That's what Jesus was doing here. He was taking Scripture, looking at his own life and his own experience and even his own death in the lens of Scripture, and bringing Scripture to bear on his circumstances.

And Scripture gave him wisdom and understanding. It shed light on what he was going through and why he's going through it and what was happening to him.

He stands on the promises of Scripture. He reads everything that happens to him in the light of God's word and so want to say to myself and to you in all circumstances of life.

Even in the hardest circumstances of life, we can rest in the promises of the Bible. We can rest in prayer and conversation with the Father. That's what Jesus is doing, isn't it?

[20:32] He's praying, he's talking to God. He's conversing with the Father in heaven. He's letting Scripture speak to him and he's speaking it back to God. Take Scripture, let it speak to you and speak it back to God.

pray, converse, rest in prayer and then rest in the trustworthiness of God.

He trusts his Father, doesn't he? Into your hands I commit my spirit. He knows God is good. He knows that God is always good, that there's never a time when God is not good and he knows that God is powerful and all-powerful and that he will entrust or that he will keep what we entrust to him. So if we trust ourselves, our lives, our destiny, our eternity into the hands of God, then God will keep that safe for us. So that's what it looks like to trust the boss.

We rest in the love of the Father, we rest in the power of the Holy Spirit, we rest in our identity as children of the Father in heaven, we rest in the promises of Scripture, we rest in prayer and conversation with God and we rest in the trustworthiness of God.

[21:49] And God gives us so many great promises. So I want to say to you, you know, this might be the most distant topic for you or it might be a very real topic for you, very tender and hard.

And whoever you are, I just want to say, take some of these things and put them in your toolbox. Carry them with you through life because they're going to serve you well. These promises of God, the hope that there is in Jesus.

Psalms 139, I was thinking about this amazing promise. Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. God is present with us wherever we are, wherever we go.

Psalms 139 again. Even the darkness is not dark to God. Something that seems dark and foreboding to us, it is not dark to him. If I say surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you.

[23:17] The night will shine like day for darkness is as light to you. The darkness is as light to you. Another great promise from the book of Romans chapter 8.

there is nothing in heaven or earth that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. So here's Paul writing saying this, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Nothing, if you trust Jesus, nothing will ever separate you from the love of God, not even death. That's an amazing promise. In all these things, even in the face of death, we are more than conquerors.

Jesus bosses death, he takes hold of death, and he triumphs over it so that we can be free from the fear of death so that we can know life with him after death.

[24 : 39] What an amazing thing that he's done for us. So we need to trust ourselves to the boss. We've been asked, again, this question about where we are in relation to Jesus Christ, what place we have for him or don't have for him in the reality of our own lives.

There's a centurion in this story, isn't it? A hard-bitten man, a man who's used to death and violence, and he sees how Jesus dies and how Jesus speaks in death, and says, surely this was a righteous man.

Surely, we're told in one of the other gospels, this is the Son of God. He saw something incredible in Christ, a life, a hope, a majesty.

He saw deity in this suffering saviour. What do you see in Jesus today? Do you see the one who holds out life to you?

So that even in the face of death, you can say, in all these things, we are more than conquerors. A story I've told before at Cornerstone and told to other people too, is about a friend of mine called James Watt, or Jimmy as he was known.

[25 : 59] And one of the amazing things about being a minister is that you get to share life and share death with people too as they experience illness and bereavement.

And Jimmy got a terminal diagnosis of throat and mouth cancer in his 50s. And he was a wee character.

He lived in Kirkcaldy all his days. He lived with his mum into his 40s. He was a very small man. And when his mum died, he became an alcoholic and homeless.

He didn't cope with her death at all. So he was a homeless alcoholic on the streets of Edinburgh when he was met by Christians from an organisation called Youth with a Mission and they shared the gospel with Jimmy and he became a believer.

He was restored, housed very close to our church in Kirkcaldy. We met him going round the doors from the church and knocking on the doors and talking to people.

[27 : 06] And he started coming along to the church for years and he still had a drink struggle in his life. He had no teeth and when he spoke he growled.

said, Hi Neil! That's the kind of way he spoke. So he was given this terminal diagnosis of throat and mouth cancer and I went to visit him the day after he got the diagnosis and I said to him, Jimmy, how are you doing?

How are you thinking about this? How are you facing this? How are you coping? And he just said to me, he said, Neil, I'm in the Lord's hands.

And then he put up his wee skinny arms and he said, I'm a conqueror. Conqueror. And that was from Romans 8.

And he was in church every Sunday up until the day before he died about three months later. And towards the end he couldn't speak at all because of the cancer. But he sat at the back of the church and greeted everybody as they arrived.

[28 : 10] And if you said to him, Jimmy, how are you doing? He couldn't really speak, but he would just say this. I'm in the Lord's hands.

And I'm a conqueror. So a man who had very little in life from a human point of view, but who triumphed in death, not because of his own capacity, his own strength or ability, not because of his success in life or anything like it.

He triumphed in death because of Jesus. And because Jesus was his rock and his salvation. And that's an incredible hope that God holds out to me and to you, whoever you are today.

What's our reaction then to this Jesus? Do we trust him, the one who is Lord of death? Do we trust him with our life and with our future?

Let me say a quick prayer. Father, we just want to thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, that we can come to the Father through him.

[29 : 24] Lord, we pray that you would speak words of comfort to us as we struggle with our own losses, with our own grief, with our own fears and sorrows. Lord, these are very real issues for lots of us and painful issues.

peace and we need your comfort and we need your strength. We need the peace and the love that you bring. And so grant amazing grace to every single one of us today, saving grace and eternal life through your son, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.