

A unique death

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[0 : 00] Shall we turn for a few moments this evening to the passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians which we read together. Galatians chapter 1 and reading again from verse 3.

Galatians chapter 1 and the third verse. Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins that he might deliver us from this present evil world according to the will of God and our Father to whom be glory forever and ever.

I'm sure that all of us can remember how just a few weeks ago in the second half of August the entire nation was shot by the Hungerford massacre.

By these terrible acts of Michael Ryan. Nothing like it was ever known before in the United Kingdom.

Our national newspapers devoted pages to the story and television newscasts were dominated by it. Now people die by the thousand every day.

[1 : 31] But apart from the relatives and friends immediately concerned, such deaths make little impact upon society. Thousands are killed on our roads and in industrial accidents every year.

But again, these deaths tend to impinge on the public consciousness only as statistics. And the many more who die of natural causes every day are not of even statistical interest to the general public.

Jonathan Swift, the essayist of a former generation, foresaw that only a few people would mourn him when he died and they only for a little while.

The rest will give a shrug and cry, he wrote. I'm sorry, but we all must die. But the Hungerford deaths were different, making an impact upon the nation unknown since the Aberdare disaster of 20 years ago.

Not even such emotional impacts, even as these, will continue to hold their power because eventually they also will be forgotten.

[2 : 53] And so we are reminded by that massacre that some deaths are different from others in the impact that they have upon men and women and upon human society.

And we are reminded that there is one death above all others, the death of Jesus Christ, which is quite different. Quite different from every other death.

Different both in terms of the nature of the event and also of its impact. He died for our sins is the message of the New Testament.

And the New Testament tells us that the death of Jesus Christ is unique. It was, in the words of John Owen, the death of death. It was different from any other.

And the impact it made continues centuries later. And so tonight we look at the death of Jesus. Look at it insofar as we are able to look at that mysterious act.

[4 : 10] And see it as an act of atonement. A unique event. The nature of which was quite unlike the nature of any other death. And we shall look at it also in the light of its impact.

Of its efficacy. Upon the lives of men and women. Not only who witnessed it. Not only who read about it. In these early years and months.

But even today. It continues to have an impact all over the world. Upon people of every language. And people of every culture.

The Christian Gospel claims that the death of Jesus Christ is unique. But it's different from every other death. And Paul explains why it is different.

How the death of Jesus is different. From the deaths at Hungerford. From the deaths in the road. From those. From deaths that are peaceful in beds.

[5 : 10] At home or in hospital. The death of Jesus is different says Paul. Because there he gave himself for our sins. That he might deliver us from this present evil age.

According to the will of God. And our father. So tonight. I want us to notice from these verses. Three things about the death of Jesus.

Which make it different. From any other death. However horrific the impact. That death may have had. The death of Jesus is unique.

Both in its nature. And in its impact. First of all. The death of Jesus is unique. Because it was no mere accident.

Accidental death. Death. Death. Comes unexpected. And unsought. People are killed. Accidentally on the roads.

[6 : 05] Every day. Of the year. My last visit to Inverness. Was just over a week ago. And on the way up early in the morning. I saw. A car which had been in an accident.

And I read in the newspaper the next day. That a man had died. A man travelling. To Inverness. Expecting to arrive.

And he never did. Because. Of an accident. Something happened which was. As far as he was concerned. Totally. Unforeseen.

And unsought. Now there are some of course. Who say that the death of Jesus. Was an accident. They point to the fact. That it was a miscarriage of justice.

They tell us. That it was a good example. Of an accidental execution. The fear of which. Turns so many people today. Against capital punishment. They tell us.

[7 : 04] That if Pilate had been. A stronger character. If he had been more concerned. With justice. Than with his own political promotion. Then the death of Jesus. Would not have happened. It's an accident. They say.

It is true of course. That the death of Jesus. Was a gross miscarriage. Of justice. It was a legal blunder. That nowhere do we read. In the New Testament.

That the apostles. Or the early Christians. Interpreted. It to be an accident. They admitted. That it was a miscarriage. Of justice.

But not. That it happened. By chance. Peter. When he proclaimed. The gospel. For the first time. On the day of Pentecost. Declared. That Jesus Christ.

Had been delivered up. By the definite plan. And for knowledge. Of God. And Paul. In these words here. At the beginning. Of what may well.

[7 : 58] Have been his earliest epistle. Tells us. How the Jesus. Died. On purpose. He tells us. That Jesus. Gave himself. To the cross.

Of Calvary. In verse 4. Our Lord Jesus Christ. Who gave himself. For our sins. And as we read the gospels. We discover.

That death did not take Jesus. By accident. Jesus knew. That he was going to die. In fact. He foretold. On several occasions. His death. To his disciples. He forewarned them.

For some strange reason. They were unable. To hear that message. That that message. Was given to them. He told them. That he was going to die. He told them. That his hour.

Would come. The son of man. He said. Came not to be served. But to serve. And to give his life. A ransom. For many. And so death.

[8 : 54] For Jesus. Was a choice. Not a fate. I have power. He said. Both to lay down my life. And to take it again. No one takes it from me. I give it.

And when he went. To the cross of Calvary. He gave himself. As Peter tells us. He. Bore our sins. In his own body. Up to the tree.

He went. Deliberately. Consciously. Purposefully. To Jerusalem. And he went to die. He was born. Yet he might die.

And Paul. Underlines this. When he says. In verse 4. That Jesus. Died. Give himself. For our sins. According to the will of God.

And our father. Not only. Paul tells us. That Jesus. Choose to die. But it was the will of God. His father. That he should die. It was according to the will of God.

[9 : 53] As Peter said. According to the definite plan. And for knowledge of God. Far from being a thing of chance. The death of Jesus. The death of Jesus was foreordained by the father.

The prophet Isaiah foreseeing. The death of the Messiah declared. Many centuries before. It pleased the Lord. To bruise him. It was the Lord's will.

That he should die. He was the lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world. It was his destiny to die. It was not simply his choice. It was his destiny.

It was the will of the father. And Paul tells us. That the death of Jesus. Is thus unique. Although his death was a violent death.

Although his death was a miscarriage of justice. Although his death was illegal blunder. It was no mere accident. It was a death which was at the center of the purpose of God.

[10 : 55] For the human race. For all eternity. And so the death of Jesus Christ was different. Because in that death. God did something. Which was unique.

And which he has not done in the death. Or in the life of anyone else. Jesus chose to die. And he died because it was the will of the father.

That's the first thing that we see. The first aspect of the uniqueness of the death of Jesus. It was no mere accident. The second thing that we notice here.

Is that the death of Jesus was no common statistic. It was no common statistic. The only lasting influence that most deaths have.

Is to push up the fatal statistics one notch. Further. At the end of the year. Our age is an age which is obsessed with statistics. We think of the influence of death almost exclusively.

[11 : 56] In statistical terms. And at the end of each year. Or the beginning of the following year. A calculation is made. About the number of road accidents. The number of people who have died on the road. The number of people who have died from lung cancer.

The number of people who have died from murder. Or from hunger. And there are some people who have a statistical interest in death. And no doubt to the Roman officials who were responsible for the death of Jesus.

His death was only a statistic. He was one more victim of the ruthless imperial policy of Rome. Which contained law and order at any price throughout the empire.

The death of Jesus by crucifixion was not unique. Literally thousands of Jews were crucified. As part of this policy. And so for them.

The death of Jesus was just one more. One more of several thousand Jewish crucifixions. During that period. Of colonial history in Palestine.

[13 : 02] But Paul tells us here. That the death of Jesus for Christian people. Is of infinitely more significance than. That of a single digit in the statistical archives in Rome.

His death he tells us was like no other death. It was the death of death. His death was unique. Because he gave himself for our sins.

He died on the cross of Calvary. To bear our sins in his own body. As Peter says. On the tree. He died for our sins.

Not for his own sins. Because he had none. And if he was unique. Unlike the other victims. Who died on either side. They were criminals.

Who in terms of the Roman law of the time. Were receiving their just desserts. That Jesus was dying as one who was innocent. And not only as one who was innocent.

[14 : 03] But as one who was sinless. And he was dying there. Because he was bearing. He was taking. He was accepting. He was absorbing. The sins of others. He died on the cross of Calvary.

Because he took our sins. He gave himself. Says Paul. For. Our. Sins. And when Jesus died upon the cross.

It was not merely that he took the burden of our sins. And bore it upon his own shoulders. He did more than that. He made atonement for our sins.

He exhausted the burden. He exhausted the curse. He absorbed it. He did away with it. The punishment which is due. To us for our sins. And he himself absorbed.

And because he was both God. And man. He was able. In his unique person. To absorb. The wrath and the curse of God. Due to us. He absorbed it. And he exhausted it.

[15 : 02] And we can say that the wrath of God. Was burnt out. In him. He died. For. Our sins.

And the language that Paul uses here. Is very similar to that which is used in the Old Testament of the Sinopter. And Paul is using here the language of sacrifice.

He's using here the language of atonement. He took the punishment of our sins. He was cursed. For us. As Paul tells us later in this epistle. He carried our sins.

Not merely in assuming their burden. But in assuming our liability. And in receiving the punishment. Due to us. For our sins. So the death of Jesus was no common statistic. It was unique. Not only that he chose to die. Not only that it was the will of God for him to die.

[16:00] But that in his death. He bore our sins in his own body. Not only as a burden. But as a sacrifice. And he made atonement.

Through his life. And through his death. And through his blood. He bore in his own soul. God's judgment for you. And for me.

He bore that judgment. In himself. He bore. He bore it there. In behalf of all his people. He absorbed. In himself. The judgment.

Which we deserve. Rightly then. John Owen said. The death of Jesus. Was the death of death. It was unique. It was different. From any other death. There was no common statistic.

It was unique. It was different. Because he bore. He the innocent. The sinless one. Bore our sins.

[17:03] In his own body. The Lord. Hath laid on him. The iniquity. Of us all. And God took. Our sins.

And he laid them upon Christ. On the cross of Calvary. And there he made atonement. For our sins. He gave himself. For our sins. As a sacrifice.

For our sins. In order that the guilt. Of our sins. Might be absorbed. Absorbed in him. In order that it might be. Atoned for. So that.

For all who are in Christ. For all who believe in him. That guilt. No longer exists. And the moment we believe in Christ. That guilt disappears.

That barrier. That burden. That enormous millstone. Around our necks. Disappears. The moment we believe in Christ. Because Christ. Has borne it.

[17:58] On behalf of all who believe in him. He has made atonement. On the cross of Calvary. Yes the death of Jesus.

Was no mere accident. It was no common statistic. And thirdly. We learn from these words. That the death of Jesus. Was no tragic. Anticlimax. The death of Jesus.

Was no tragic. Anticlimax. When a young man. Or a young woman. Dies. In the full. Vigor. Of life. Of life. We say. What a tragedy. We say. What a tragedy. That such a life. Was suddenly cut short. In its time. And there is inevitably. A terrible sense of. Anticlimates. Of incomplete. Of incompleteness. When some young life.

[18:53] Is struck down. There is that sense of. Unfulfillment. Of anticlimates. And this to be true. To be fair.

Is how Jesus' disciples felt. At first. In the night of the crucifixion. They. Regarded. Initially. The death of Jesus. As such an anticlimax.

They saw the cross. As the symbol. Of bitter defeat. We thought. They said. Talking one to another. We thought. That it was he. Who would have redeemed. Israel. Who would have set Israel. Free from the Romans.

That sense of anticlimate. Quickly disappeared. When Jesus. Appeared to them. Having risen. From the dead. The resurrection. Transformed. This apparent sense of defeat. Into victory.

And Peter. Could stand up. The Peter. Who had denied. Jesus three times. The disciples. Who had forsaken him. And fled. Could stand. Act. And face. The authorities.

[19:50] On the day of Pentecost. And declare. That this Jesus. Whom you have crucified. God has declared. To be both Lord. And Christ. Paul here tells us.

That the death of Jesus. Was not a defeat. It was not an anticlimax. Rather he says. It was a deliverance. He gave himself. For our sins. That he might deliver us.

From this present evil world. According to the will of God. And our father. He tells us. That the death of Jesus. Was God's means.

Of delivering. Men and women. From the bondage. Of sin. The word that he uses here. And the word which is. Which is translated. Deliver. Means literally. To rescue.

It's the word. Which was used. By Stephen. In his sermon. In Acts chapter 7. Of Israel. Being delivered. From. From slavery. In Egypt. Of Israel. Being delivered.

[20:47] From. From slavery. In Egypt. It is the word. Which is used. Also in the Acts of the Apostles. Of Peter. Being set free. From prison. And of Paul. Being set free. From the lynch mob. Who sought.

To kill him. In chapter 23. In the Acts of the Apostles. In the Acts of the Apostles. And this is the idea. That Paul is communicating here. Christ gave himself. For our sins.

In order that he might. Rescue us. In order that he might. Set us free. In order that he might. Deliver us. And so this. The death of Jesus.

Was no. Tragic anticlimax. But the beginning. Of a great. Act. A great drama. Of redemption. A great drama. Of deliverance. It was part of a great.

Rescue mission. On the part. Of the Son of God. Who came into this world. To seek and to save. Those who are lost. And in fact. Some commentators. Believe that this word.

[21 : 41] Deliver. Is the keynote. Of this whole letter. The deliverance of Christ. The way in which he can deliver. Not only from the guilt of sin. But from the bondage.

Of legalism. From the bondage. Of. Of. Of being slaves. To fashion. As well as slaves. As slaves to the past. He came to deliver.

Us. From this present. Evil. Age. Because that's what the world. The word. World. Means here. And so Christ came to effect.

A deliverance. Through his death. He is able to deliver. Men and women today. Far from his life work. Being cut short. And frustrated. By his death. Rather his life work.

Was fulfilled through it. He came to die. The son of man. Came. To give his life. A ransom. For many. He died.

[22 : 40] For our sins. Upon the cross. This is why he came. He came. And in his death. He fulfilled. God's plan.

To establish. This rescue. Mission. There in the cross. He found. The lost men and women. That he came. To seek.

And to save. And in particular. Paul tells us here. That he. Came. To deliver us. From this present. Evil.

Age. Now the Bible. Tends to think. Of time. In. Two. Main tenses. Jesus. It thinks of. This. Age. Or this world. And. That world. We think of the saying of Jesus. For example. In Luke's gospel. The children of this world. Marry. And are given in marriage. But they.

[23 : 36] Who shall be. Accounted. Worthy. To obtain. That world. And the resurrection. From the dead. Neither marry. Nor are given in marriage. Now we don't. Need to note the context.

Of. In which Jesus is speaking. But he is speaking there. Of the children. Of this world. And contrasting them. With the children. Of that world. There's this world. And there's that world. Or more correctly. This age. And that age. And the Bible. Thinks. In these terms. Of this age. Which began. With. With. With. With. With. The creation. Of the human race. And. The new age. Which will begin. When Jesus Christ. Comes again. And he will establish.

A new heavens. And a new earth. There's this age. And there's that age. And what Paul says here. Is that when Jesus died. Upon the cross. He died. Not only for our sins.

[24 : 30] As a sacrifice. To make atonement. For our sins. But he died. Also to deliver us. To rescue us. From this present. Evil age. Age. Because this age.

In which we live. Is an age. Which is. Identified. With sin. It is identified. With. Natural desire. It is identified.

With. Immorality. It's identified. With corruption. It's identified. With lawlessness. And when Christ came.

To die. For our sins. He not only died. To save us. From the consequences. From the penalty. Of our sins. But he came to. Save us from the lifestyle. Of sin. He came to save us. From. From. From lives. Which are dominated. By sin. He came to save us. From. This. Present. Evil. Age. And he came in order.

[25 : 34] That he might save us. For. That new age. Which is to come. Which is to come. And so. In his death. The Lord Jesus Christ. Came not only to deliver us.

From something. But to deliver us. Into. Something. And so. And so. We have this contrast. Right through. The New Testament. Between this present age.

Which is characterized. By sin. And by death. And the new age. Which is characterized. By righteousness. And by life. Eternal life. The gospel.

Also tells us. That although. That age. To come. Will be. Consummated. At the beginning. At the beginning. Of the new age. At the advent. Of Jesus. That although.

It will be consummated. Then. There is a sense. In which. It has begun. Now. And there is a sense. In which. In the life. Of believers. The two ages. Overlap. And a Christian.

[26 : 30] Is someone. Who is a citizen. Of both ages. He belongs. To the old age. In virtue of his sin. He belongs. To the new age. In virtue of Christ. And he belongs.

To both. While he is here. In this life. And so we can say. That the new age. Has not yet. Fully come. And that the old age. Has not yet. Passed away.
But there is a sense. In which. The new age. Has come. It has begun. And that's why. Paul says. In his letter. To the Corinthians. If any man. Be in Christ.
There is a new. Creation. All things. Have become new. He passes. From death. To life. He passes. Out of one age. Into the other. That's why.
Paul uses. Dramatic terms. Of people. Being transplanted. Being lifted. Being transformed. Out of one age. Into another. And when we believe.
[27 : 29] In Jesus Christ. We become. Citizens of the new age. We become. The inheritors. Of eternal life. Death. You see. Eternal death. Was absorbed. By Christ. Upon the cross. Because when he died there.

He bore. Not only. The physical death. Which was inflicted. By the Roman nails. And by the excruciating pain. Of crucifixion. He absorbed there.
The death. Which is the curse of sin. He absorbed there. The death of deaths. He absorbed there. Hell itself. He absorbed there. The curse. Of God.
The curse. Of God. Upon us. For our sins. So that when we believe in him. And are in him. We are delivered. From that curse. We are set free. And we become citizens of the new age.
We pass. From death. Into life. And so you see the death of Jesus. Far from being. An end. A tragic. Cut off.

[28 : 23] Before his time. Was in fact the beginning. I mean it was in fact the inauguration of a new era. It was not an end.

But a beginning. Not a tragedy. But a great and glorious act. In which he initiated.
An age which will have its fulfillment. And come to its flower. And its consummation. In the new heavens. And in the new earth. From which sin. And death. And corruption. Will be banished.
And in which love. And peace. And faith. And hope. And good works. Will flourish. And so the death of Jesus Christ.

We are reminded here. Was no tragic anticlimax. It was the beginning. Of a new era. The beginning of a new creation. The life. The death. The resurrection. Of Jesus Christ.

[29 : 30] I wonder tonight. To which creation. Do we belong. Are we citizens of this age only? Have we become citizens of that age.

Which has already begun. And which is still to come. It is possible by the grace of God tonight. To step out of one age.

Into the other. It is possible to be delivered. Right out. Of one age. Into the other. It is possible tonight.

To make the transfer. Between one age. And the other. And it is possible. Because Christ died. For our sins. According to the scriptures.

It is possible. Because not only. Did Christ die. And in his death. Effect. A unique atonement. For our sins. But because. From that death. Flows today.

[30 : 28] A power. And an efficacy. And a virtue. Which can lift men and women. Out of their sins. And bring them. Into eternal life. And so the death of Jesus.

I repeat. Is unique. Not only because of what it is. But because of what it does. It is unique. Not only because of what. God and Christ.

Put into it. But. Also because of what. God and Christ. Caused to flow from it. And that is why. Paul could say. To the Corinthians. That the message. Which he preached. Of the cross of Christ. Was the power of God. Unto salvation. Because from that.

Unique event. Down through the centuries. And across the cultures. Flows a power. Which can transform. Human destiny. Which can lift men and women.

[31 : 24] Out of their bondage. Sorrow and night. And bring them. Into newness of life. Bring them. Out of the kingdom of darkness. Into the kingdom of light. Bring them.

Out of this age. Into that age. And the promise of the gospel. Is that that power. Which initiated. At the cross of Calvary.

That power. Which comes from that. Fountain. Which comes from that. From that dynamo. That power. Is flowing tonight. Flowing to us.

Through the gospel. And we are being invited. To lay hold upon that power. We are being invited. To take advantage of it. We are being invited. To turn to Christ.

In order that we might experience. That power. And know what it is. To be lifted. To be delivered. To be rescued. Pope. Sometimes we see.

[32 : 21] In television. A rescue at sea. We see the rescue helicopter. Going out there. We see a line. Coming down. Very often. A man.

Coming down. In that line. And he attaches it. To a person. Who's. Desperately. Trying to keep afloat. In the sea. Then you can see. That person being lifted up. rescued by the helicopter, taken out of the sea and taken to land. Now that's what Jesus Christ can do for men and women tonight. He can come to you and he offers, put down his hand to lift you up out of this age, out of the age of death, out of the age which is condemned and which will be destroyed and which will bear the judgment of God forever. He offers to lift you, to rescue you and take you over and bring you into the new age, that age of eternal life, that age which is to come.

That is God's rescue mission which we see exhibited in the death of Jesus and the power of which flows out down through the centuries tonight. The greatest power this universe has ever seen is the power of Christ's death and resurrection. And by the gospel that power comes to you and to me tonight. And Christ is offering to rescue you. He's offering to lift you and to take you out of your sins, out of your guilt and bring you out of spiritual darkness and a wrong relationship with God into spiritual light which will enable you to call God your Father and love him and worship him and serve him forever and ever. And so through the gospel the hand of Christ reaches down tonight.

I wonder, is there someone here who wants that hand to lay hold upon them? Sometimes there are those who refuse to be rescued from a fire or from a shipwreck.

Tragically, they prefer to die. And often I fear there are many people like that with the gospel rescue mission. They shrug their shoulders and they say no. God forbid that tonight anyone in this church should turn Christ should turn Christ away. Christ who has come through many a sermon preached in this pulpit down over 150 years in the pulpit of this congregation.

[35 : 11] God forbid that tonight when we celebrate these 150 years of gospel preaching, God forbid that anyone should turn Christ away. That anyone should turn their back to Christ. Christ who has died for our sins, Christ who has loved us, Christ who comes through the gospel to us in his mercy and in his grace.

God forbid that there should be anyone here tonight who will turn Christ away. And we pray, God, that there may be those who tonight will lay hold upon Christ, who will clasp that nail-pierced hand as it reaches out to them, and by faith lay hold upon him who lays hold upon them, and experience his power to lift and to deliver, to lift and to rescue. May God grant that tonight each one of us may cry out to the Lord and ask him to rescue us, ask him to save us, ask him to deliver us, that we tonight may discover the death of Jesus Christ to be the power of God unto salvation.

Let us pray. Our gracious Lord and God and Father in heaven, we come to give thee thanks for the power of the gospel.

We thank thee that the death of the Lord Jesus is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, and grant that tonight there may be those who believe in this service.

Grant, O Lord, that thou wilt help us to realize the urgency of our state. Help us to recognize that we are lost out of Christ, and that we are in danger of committing spiritual suicide if we turn ourselves away from him.

[37 : 21] And as he comes to us tonight through the gospel, grant that we may lay hold upon this offer, that we may trust in him, that we may believe and discover the gospel to be the power of God and to salvation.

We pray that thy Holy Spirit may take these things and apply them to all our hearts, and that tonight there may be those in this building who by thy grace will pass out of death into life.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.