****

**Sunday 3 September 2023 to Sunday 10 September 2023**

****

Sunday 3 September 2023

**Seek discomfort?!**

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

***Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it (Matthew 16:24,25).***

Read [Matthew 16:21–28](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+16%3A21%E2%80%9328&version=NRSVUE)

My son and I watch a YouTube series called *Yes Theory*, where the hosts travel to countries/situations that are intentionally uncomfortable: ‘We believe that life's greatest moments and deepest connections exist outside your comfort zone.’ By their own admission, they find adventure in uncomfortable settings – travelling to impoverished or troubled countries, entering the lives of local people, hearing their stories and helping them. Their motto is ‘Seek discomfort’.

To a degree, I relate to this as a follower of Jesus because it goes against the grain of modern society’s motto, ‘Seek comfort’! We are told to seek comfortable modern homes, comfortable clothes, ‘comfort’ foods, comfortable situations, a comfortable job and a comfortable level of retirement savings. The motivation behind revolutionary technology is often to make life easier and better. Our medicine should magically make our maladies disappear. Our parenting revolves around ‘keeping our kids happy’. And so when discomfort or adversity inevitably arrives, we find ourselves unprepared and annoyed; ‘This wasn’t meant to happen! How dare this happen to me!’

Some of us find vigour in discipline. Many of us don’t (chief among us is myself!). A case in point for me is physical exercise. Growing up on our farm, ‘exercise’ was rounding up sheep and carrying bags of wheat – an uncomfortable task that made me and my dad tired and grumpy! In his words, ‘Why would I want to do physical exercise when I finish work? I do this all day long!’ Nowadays, my medical condition requires me to exercise. I have learnt that I can’t do it alone – I need assistance, reminders and someone to do it with me.

Jesus’ words on discipleship here are an ‘anti-motto’ to our modern way of thinking. They are really shocking: ‘Accept your device of torture and death and follow me.’ They are a reminder that the trappings of this life are an illusion and temporary. Being a disciple means letting go of the power they wield over us, venturing out of our comfort zone and not being surprised by discomfort. But we are not supposed to do this alone. Following Jesus means being with him – and others, as we follow him. Jesus is with you in your discomfort; be with others in their discomfort!

***Lord Jesus, help me to let go of the trappings of this world, the ties that bind, and the illusion of this life’s comforts. I lay them at your feet. Lead me in your ways. Be with me in the discomforts I face. Help me to be with others in their discomfort. Amen.***

*Stephen Abraham is a retired Lutheran pastor and musician who served as a school pastor and church planter in Mawson Lakes, South Australia. Stephen retired early due to a spinal injury, leaving him largely housebound with chronic pain (documented by Lutheran Media on its Messages of Hope YouTube channel and radio program). As his condition allows, Stephen still preaches, takes chapel and serves his local church and school. He also writes and records personal songs, worship songs and Christian meditations, which he shares on his YouTube channel (*[*youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic*](https://www.youtube.com/StephenAbrahamMusic)*).*

Monday 4 September 2023

**Given and received**

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

***For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3).***

Read [1 Corinthians 15:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+15%3A1%E2%80%9311&version=NRSVUE)

When did the religious faith that was passed on to you become your own? Some of us may have had a conversion as an adult leading to baptism. For some of us, the lights came on gradually; for others, it was an epic, vivid experience. Some of us who grew up baptised in the faith just always believed (which was my experience). Yet, I distinctly remember a time in my teens after doing the whole ‘going to church because my parents made me’ thing where I thought to myself, ‘I’m just going to read Gideon’s NIV New Testament and check it out for myself’. I specifically remember reading 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 with wide-eyed wonder, and even with my un-theologically-trained eye, thinking, ‘This must be where we get some of the Apostles’ Creed from!’

This verse tells us so much in so few words. It tells us that faith is meant to be passed on – given and received. It tells us that talking about our faith – what it is and why we believe it – is just what Christians do! It is in our DNA. Faith is meant to be passed on from friend to friend, sister to brother, parent to child (or even child to parent!). In this verse, we get both a personal testimony from Paul and an early creedal statement that did indeed form the basis of latter official creeds of the church.

If you haven’t done it before, here is something worth role-playing. How would you respond if someone asked you what you believe and why? (Maybe spend a minute now or later and write down your response.)

Even in this brief creedal nutshell, Paul personalises this faith statement by owning up to his own ‘warts and all’ experience of railing against the early Christians in verses 8 to 10. I reckon that is pretty gutsy and honest. What is powerful, though, is that he contrasts it with what coming to believe in the gospel meant for him personally; he went from hating on it to heralding it big time!

***Holy Spirit, thank you for the way you moved in those who shared the faith with me. Thank you for guiding me to faith. Heavenly Father, give me the opportunity to share my faith with others and give me the courage to do it – warts and all. Thank you for saving me, Lord Jesus. Amen.***

Tuesday 5 September 2023

**Resurrection, part 1: Let's get physical!**

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

***But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:12)?***

Read [1 Corinthians 15:12–28](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+15%3A12%E2%80%9328&version=NRSVUE)

Popular culture is absolutely rife with resurrections. Mr Spock is resurrected in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, Neo dies and comes back to life in *The Matrix*, Superman comes back to life in Zack Schneider’s *Justice League*, and Gandalf the Grey transforms into Gandalf the White in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Even here on Australian TV, the award-winning fictional ABC series *Glitch* follows seven people from different eras who mysteriously burst out of their graves in perfect health in rural Victoria but only have some of their memories and must recover them. Resurrection is an accepted trope in science fiction. Director James Cameron famously said when asked about bringing back characters who had died for the sequel to his film, *Avatar*, ‘In science fiction, nobody's ever really dead!’

I find the preoccupation that secular culture has with resurrection and the afterlife fascinating. For Hollywood writers, ‘Christian faith might not be in vogue, but we sure won’t let go of our firm hope in the afterlife!’ Resurrection is the in thing! As the people of the Resurrected One, I think this is a point of connection we have with popular culture – something we can connect with and use as an example as we share our faith with others. At some point in our lives, we will find ourselves sharing one of the primal tenets of Christianity: we will rise again from the dead just like Jesus did!

Over the next few devotions, we will examine what Paul says to the Corinthian church (and indeed all of us) about bodily resurrection. Obviously, some in this church community were wrestling with this issue, and Paul tackles it head-on here!

Paul is firm on this point throughout the chapter; it's not just the soul that goes into heaven or a person’s disembodied spirit released from the body. We don’t die and become Casper the Friendly Ghost floating around! It is the resurrection of the dead – *nekros* – a lifeless corpse coming alive again. Resurrection is a physical life being restored. And Paul underscores it with that beautiful symmetry: bodily death came through Adam, and bodily resurrection through Christ Jesus.

So next time you are at a worship service and say the Apostles' Creed, take note of the second to last phrase we say: ‘I believe in ... the resurrection of the body.’

***Risen Lord Jesus, firstborn of the dead, we celebrate your resurrection – your victory over death and the sign that we, too, will rise to life with you when we die. Thank you for my salvation. Help me share this joy with others. Amen.***

Wednesday 6 September 2023

**Resurrection, part 2: What happens when we die?**

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

***But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?’ (1 Corinthians 15:35).***

Read [1 Corinthians 15:29–41](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+15%3A29%E2%80%9341&version=NRSVUE)

I’ve had the absolute honour of sitting with a number of precious people in their last days. I count it a treasured gift to minister to them in this sacred time. Often as we talk, pretence melts away, and the person bares their soul. As we share in deep and meaningful conversation, questions arise about their life, loves and regrets, past sins that need confession/absolution, and hurts that need forgiving and letting go of. Naturally, the questions regarding mortality come: What will I experience when I die? Where will I go? What will I see? There are a lot of responses to this depending on the person’s upbringing and faith tradition, and these need unpacking and guidance from Scripture and sometimes even some gentle teaching.

‘Christ has been raised from the dead ... so all will be made alive in Christ’ (verses 20–23) when he comes again. So what kind of body will we have when we are resurrected? Paul uses analogies from the natural world:

* A dead-looking seed must be planted to have new life.
* A buried seed changes state into a plant.
* There are different kinds of bodies: flesh (verse 39) and heavenly (verses 40–41)

And so it follows: ‘This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised, it will be immortal’ (1 Corinthians 15:42, Good News Translation).

What happens when we die as perceived by others? Our life ceases. Like a dead-looking seed, we are planted in the ground. We become a cherished memory to them. The next time they see us, we are alive again, immortal!

What happens when we die – how do we perceive it? I liken it to when we fall asleep or go unconscious. Your awareness stops. The next thing you know, you have skipped eight hours, it’s morning, time has passed that you weren’t aware of at all, and as you open your eyes, a new day begins. Except this new day is eternity!

***Almighty God, Heavenly Father, we thank you for this life you have given us. Help us use our earthly days wisely and support those in their final days or who have lost loved ones. We thank you for the life to come – the place you have prepared for us, Lord Jesus. In your name, we pray, Amen.***

Thursday 7 September 2023

**Resurrection, part 3: What kind of bodies will we have?**

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

***So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power (1 Corinthians 15:42,43).***

Read [1 Corinthians 15:29–41](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+15%3A42%E2%80%9350+&version=NRSVUE)

If you know my story from Messages of Hope on YouTube or the radio, you know I received a spinal injury in my early 30s that left me permanently disabled with severe chronic pain. It didn’t heal through science. It didn’t heal through prayer. It didn’t heal through faith healers. It just stayed broken, and I've had to learn to live with it as best as I can. My ‘broken heart’ has been healed through God’s mercy and grace and in using what’s left of my life to help and inspire others and it – such as it is – to the full. But, man, I’d love to have a day without severe chronic pain! What I’d give to have a body that worked properly and wasn’t slowly decaying.

Perishable versus imperishable, weakness versus power, dishonour versus glory, natural versus spiritual (in the sense of transformed/glorified, not incorporeal). How Paul describes this metamorphosis is profound. Compared to our present mortal state, this change into our resurrected form seems simply and utterly amazing. Bring it on! If that is eternal life, I want it!

Remember that Paul has personally seen a resurrected body – in the person of the Lord Jesus himself (1 Corinthians 15:8 and Acts 9). This is why he knows what he’s talking about and goes to great pains to share what was revealed to him in the person of the risen Lord Jesus he saw on the road to Damascus.

Theologians and scholars have tried distilling what we know from Scripture about our resurrected bodies. We definitely know that they will be:

1. death-proof (eternal/immortal) (1 Corinthians 15:42,53; Romans 6:8–11)
2. suffering-proof (no more pain or tears) (Revelation 21:4)
3. physical and recognisable as who we have been (Luke 24:36–43)
4. transformed like Jesus’ resurrected body (and possibly ‘glowy’!) (Philippians 3:21, 1 Corinthians 15:40,41,43,49; Acts 9:3).

Lutherans talk a lot in our theology of the ‘how’ and ‘why’: how God comes to us in word and sacrament, how law and gospel function, why we cannot earn salvation, how we are saved by grace through faith etc. We don’t talk a lot about the ‘what’ – especially what comes next. What happens after our ultimate salvation, what happens when we die, what is heaven like, and what will our gloried bodies be like? We are big on the meat and veg – the main course, not so much on the dessert! First Corinthians 15 is all dessert! Our heavenly reward – our ‘just desserts’, as it were, but in a positive sense. ‘Just’ because of Jesus! And it’s going to be sweet – oh so sweet!

***Father of Lights, we thank you for what awaits us through the salvation of your dear Son. As our bodies ache and groan, remind us that this suffering is temporary compared to the glory that awaits us. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Holy Spirit, sustain us until our time comes and our eternity with you begins. Amen.***

Friday 8 September 2023

**Resurrection, part 4: Will there be big-screen TVs in heaven?**

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

***Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51,52).***

Read [1 Corinthians 15:51–58](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+15%3A51%E2%80%9358&version=NRSVUE)

My oldest cousin has lived his whole life with autism and intellectual disability. But his parents never treated him as disabled. He was just different. He has lived such a full life; he works hard, flies kites and drones, is a master fisherman, and has an epic model train set he built with his late father since childhood. He loves his TV and loves for me to watch him play Formula One racing games on it! He has attended church faithfully every Sunday since childhood and is now in his mid-60s. As special people in his life have passed away, he wonders what happens when we die. The last time I saw him in person, he asked me, ‘Will there be big-screen TVs in heaven?’

Finally, we get the low-down from Paul. The timetable of how all he has talked about in this chapter will go down:

* Not all will be asleep (in death); some will be awake (alive).
* In an instant, the transformation happens.
* The trumpet fanfare blasts (marking the end of time – the siren that the game is over and your team just won the grand final!).
* The dead are raised and, along with those alive, take on their imperishable body.

How will we feel at that point? It stands to reason we will be happiest beyond what we can fathom. To be beyond our very best – death-proof, suffering-proof, retaining the essence of who we are now but transformed with glorified bodies.

So, how did I respond to my cousin?

‘It’s great that your TV makes you happy. Scripture tells us your deceased brother and dad will be there in heaven, and my mum and dad too – not old and broken – but better than the best they were in their lifetime. I know you will be the happiest you have ever been seeing them whole again and seeing Jesus. Even happier than when you enjoy your PlayStation on your big-screen TV.’

***Heavenly Father, we look forward to what you have prepared for us – your house with many rooms. We look forward to seeing those who have gone before with tears of joy and happiness beyond measure. We look forward to this because of you, Lord Jesus, your salvation won for us on the cross. See you soon. Amen.***

Saturday 9 September 2023

**Breathing in God’s ways**

by Pastor Stephen Abraham

***Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end (Psalm 119:33).***

Read [Psalm 119:33-40](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+119%3A33-40&version=NRSVUE)

In Psalm 119:33–40, we find a heartfelt plea to the Lord for guidance, understanding, and a heart aligned with his divine will. The psalmist's words echo our own, yearning to walk closely with God, seeking his ways above all else. Today, I invite you to try a meditative practice of ‘breathing’ these verses as we read them together silently. It’s a simple way to receive God’s word contemplatively.

Get yourself comfortable and be in a space that is free of distractions. You might want to turn your devices to silent or wear headphones if you are in a noisy environment. You can lay your palms upward in the sign of the cross if you wish – a sign of your salvation and that you are open to receiving God’s word.

Breathe in slowly as you read the first half of each verse, and breathe out slowly over the last half. You might like to begin with a few deep, slow breaths as you say the invocation silently, continue with today’s verse and then end with prayer.

(breathing in)  
In the name of the Father,  
(breathing out)  
and of the Son,  
(breathing in)  
and of the Holy Spirit,  
(breathing out)  
Amen.

(breathing in)  
Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees,  
(breathing out)  
that I may follow it to the end.

(breathing in)  
Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law  
(breathing out)  
and obey it with all my heart.

(breathing in)  
Direct me in the path of your commands,  
(breathing out)  
for there I find delight.

(breathing in)  
Turn my heart toward your statutes  
(breathing out)  
and not toward selfish gain.

(breathing in)  
Turn my eyes away from worthless things;  
(breathing out)  
preserve my life according to your word.

(breathing in)  
Fulfil your promise to your servant,  
(breathing out)  
so that you may be feared.

(breathing in)  
Take away the disgrace I dread,  
(breathing out)  
for your laws are good.

(breathing in)  
How I long for your precepts!  
(breathing out)  
In your righteousness, preserve my life.

***Almighty God, Heavenly Father, we thank you for the transforming power of your word. May it bring us guidance throughout the day by the power of your Holy Spirit. Help us live in the rhythms of your grace as we go about our tasks today. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.***

Sunday 10 September 2023

**Sin, forgiveness, prayer and presence**

by Ruth Olsen

***If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for ... (Matthew 18:19a).***

Read [Matthew 18:15–20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+18%3A15-20&version=NRSVUE)

Each of us is responsible before our Heavenly Father for what we say and do. Matthew 18 begins with Jesus' disciples asking him who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. His response: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 18:3,4 NIV). But woe to anyone who causes little ones who believe in him to sin! Get rid of, or turn and run away from, anything that causes you to sin. For the Father doesn’t want any of his little ones to be lost (verses 1–14).

Next, Jesus is speaking to adults, where sin happens one to another. As adults, we are to exercise responsibility when something wrong is said or done; to go privately, one-to-one – where applicable – to try to deal with that wrong for the relationship to be restored. Of course, if the wrong is done to a child, or there is some other unequal level of power, a different strategy is needed.

Receiving correction is not easy for any of us; likewise, neither is giving it! Pride and fear get in the way. It takes courage to recognise and acknowledge wrongdoing. Like Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, we would rather hide from God and blame others when found out. Broken, fallen human nature resists truth.

But Jesus gives us the gifts of forgiveness, prayer and his presence to help us in any situation. And if we can agree with another person on earth about anything we ask his help in, knowing he is right there with us, that prayer can be answered. There’s power to change where there is agreement in prayer. Hearts can be softened, and courage received to acknowledge wrongdoing and receive help in repairing the wrongdoing where possible. None of it is easy.

Like Peter (verse 21), we ask, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive …?’ We feel justified in asking that question, not recognising it is the wrong question to ask. But when we forgive, we are ‘loosed’, set free from the wrong done to us, and our Heavenly Father can deal with it on our behalf.

**Lord, have mercy. Change our hearts; renew our minds. By the power of your Spirit, give us courage in dealing with these things. Amen.**

*Ruth thoroughly enjoys the opportunity that ‘retirement’ provides to see more of this beautiful country. When you are reading this, Ruth and Steen will be wandering somewhere in Western Australia, with their caravan, probably marvelling at the brilliant diversity of wildflowers to be found there.*