

Advent Mission High Adventure 1

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] My name is Will Johnston. There's a T in my name. I've gone through my life putting the T in. People named Johnson go through taking it out. And that's okay.

I'm also a member of our Thursday Breakfast Bible Study rather than a member. I don't feel so bad. Right now, my voice is shaking.

My hands are shaking. My heart is pounding. My throat is dry. I'm swallowing more times than I need to. And all for what?

We have just read, in fact, that the Lord is the stronghold of my life and of whom shall I be afraid? I must not be afraid of someone. It must just be that this means a lot to me to be able to say these things to you tonight.

I'm going to jump three-quarters of the way through my life to a time when I was staying with some distant acquaintances in an old house, and I was sleeping on the couch in the children's room, which was full of junk.

[1 : 1 1] And as I fell off to sleep, the streetlight shadows fell on the wall, and the toys and old hobby horses and sort of forgotten board games and that sort of thing cast a shadow on the wall, which was slightly sinister.

And I was also developing either a hangover or the flu. I couldn't quite decide because I had reasons for both. At around four o'clock in the morning, I woke up.

Do I have to say the whole thing over again? Yes. Is that better? Yes. Briefly, I had gone to sleep feeling rather unwell, and this was about ten years ago now.

I woke up at about four in the morning with something I'd never experienced before, and that was the sensation that although I was awake, I could not move. Now, to the extent that I could, I felt as though I was in a vice.

Every muscle and bone in my body was completely immobilized and had a kind of a pressure on it. And I felt as though I was surrounded by a sensation of complete and foreboding evil, a depth of evil and a menacing nature of evil such as I had never experienced before.

[2 : 3 2] I have since, as I have gone through my training and in my experience as a physician, recognized the sensation of being frozen as something called sleep paralysis, which is actually quite a common and a very benign condition, something that isn't to be worried over unnecessarily.

But at the time, it had never happened to me before, and in my complete terror, and I had been brought to a moment, obviously, of complete terror for some reason, I suppose, in retrospect, I imagined a cross, and for some reason, I added flames.

I think that was to make it more effective. And that flaming cross, I imagined hovering over top of me, and the sensation of evil, for some reason, left me.

And I then discovered that if I moved my eyes, I could wake up. I could move. I was awake. And I lay there in a terrible sweat and terribly afraid and really didn't know what had happened except that I felt that I'd been menaced and that something had saved me.

And I rationalized, since I had had 19 years of practice at rationalization at that point, I rationalized that coming from a Christian society, I had chosen the most prominent symbol of good in my society, and I had put that up there above me as a kind of a talisman to ward off that evil.

[3 : 57] Let's just leave that as an experience, and I'm going to backtrack a little bit. I got a good deal of my self-respect while I was growing up from the fact that I did well in school.

I was short for my age. Not unduly short, but short enough that I wasn't chased by members of the opposite sex with great avidity.

I was also not particularly good-looking as far as I was concerned, and that was enough to make me look elsewhere for sources of ego gratification.

I think I found them in my grades to a certain extent because I never had any trouble with grades, especially with that invalid form of testing called the multiple-choice exam.

In fact, I had such good luck with it that I was often able to not know anything about a subject and actually do quite well on those exams. So that by the time I had grown up and had gone through university and had become a doctor, although I had had times at which I doubted that rational, scientific pursuit was the complete answer to what made me a real person.

[5 : 27] They hadn't been very threatening times, and life had treated me very well. But I had the sensation that something was missing, and I can't be more specific than that.

I think you've heard a lot of people say that who have eventually come to Christ. I was fortunate enough to be a candidate for marriage, even though I wasn't a Christian, to a young woman named Laura.

She... So... I really don't want to cry, because I don't want to distract you from this story, but...

Nora made all the difference. I knew her too well to really understand where the goodness that I saw in her was coming from, and I assumed that something of that goodness must come from something higher.

I think that that was a valid assumption, and it certainly made the difference to me, because I was able, through Nora, to have contact with the people that everyone in this room has a chance to have contact with here at this church.

[7 : 10] One of the... the phrases which seemed to leap out at me from the New Testament, and I must say that as I began to learn more about the New Testament, there was a...

a sensation of truth and light and beauty which seemed to come forth from the pages of that book, which I couldn't account for by any traditional traditional measurements of poetic beauty or brilliant composition or any of the other things you might have heard the Bible described as when people call it a great work of literature.

One of the particularly forceful sentences which came out of that book for me was and I prefer the old English sound to this, but how profiteth it a man if he gains the whole world and yet loses his soul.

it strikes me that for that statement to have any meaning the word soul has to be inspected more closely and for it to bother you that you lose your soul A.

you have to believe that you have one and B. there has to be something about losing it which is worrisome in some way. to put that statement in a different way how does a man profit if he gains everything that can be seen heard smelt felt tasted and measured in some way in some objective scientific way if he loses something else which can't be seen smelt felt tasted measured which is so much more important that the other stuff pales into insignificance and I think that it's the idea that there is that something more which is the key to belief and I don't think that's anything strange or revolutionary staying warm has been much in my mind lately because it's been so cold out and I've always felt that hot water is the foundation of civilization the business of being in bed at five o'clock in the morning was an analogy which came to mind when I was thinking about the business of being successful and happy and convinced all of this on one level that you don't need anything anymore as you are convinced in that sleepy state at five in the morning that you don't need anything more than the warmth that's around you you know that there's cold out there somehow and that eventually you'll have to face it but not right now you know you've got time or you think you've got time and then what if you are awakened at that time in that state by the sound of a door opening the creek as though your basement door opened you know what do you do there really are some there are three different possibilities it could be your imagination it could be something that's harmless and easily explained it could be just something creaking in the wind or it could be something that's immensely significant there could be someone entering your house who leans you ill this could be a great evil and I think that hearing of the word of God and having the concepts presented to you that are presented in an evening like this it's something like hearing that sound because from that moment on you can't really rest easy there's no substitute really for the moment when you throw off the covers and the cold air hits you and you plod off down the hall to find out what that was that's a sort of homey way of analogizing what is a very important experience

[12 : 03] I'm happy that I've plodded along in my own way and in a very halting and sometimes tentative way I've become what I consider a Christian I was going to take off my watch to make sure I didn't remove my time I have little more to say that other than that my coming to belief required that I overcome pride about what all the people who had told me that I should become a Christian would think about me the people who might say we told you all along what was good for you we told you all along that this was right this was a barrier to me all I can say is that God has spared me that humiliation somehow the old Christians who told me that years ago

I haven't run across that frequently and they became very kind the first communion that I took as a Christian gave me a sensation or I was washed over with a memory as maybe a more adequate way of putting it of a sense of expectation and promise which suddenly let me remember a similar thing as a child I don't know when as a child but I knew excuse me I knew that I was remembering something of what it was like to be a child I was deeply moved by that sensation I think that the fallenness and the tarnishedness of our lives stands out so clearly the shabbiness if we can remember our hopes as children and the dreams of the promise and potential that the world held when we were children I think we were all children to some extent in that in another sense we never stopped raising children in terms of being adults to the people around us

I can finally come really then to the point where the words come to me all that are labored that are weary and heavy burdened I will give you rest that meant something thank you thank you this is the point at which you will need the pink sheets they have to ask you to pray briefly as the choir moves slowly and then I'd like to talk to you could we just bow our heads our God and Father as we have come here for very specific business tonight and that is that we might know what it is to be a disciple of Jesus

Christ we just ask that you will so use your word as a sword attacking the proud castle of our self-sufficient hearts that we may come to the place of commitment to Jesus Christ commitment which will last through time and by your grace through eternity we ask this in his name amen it is the most amazing thing to have somebody in the congregation whom I know or suspect I know fairly well like Will Johnson stand up and tell how it actually happened that he encountered the Christian faith he is a very argumentative fellow he is very well informed he has the most amazing catalog of statistics in his in his mind the one he came out with last week that I'm still staggering under you want to hear it was that if the

American government stop advertising smoking it would cost them six billion dollars a year in old age pensions that's a fairly grim statistic but I thought you might like to hear it the other thing which really took me off guard with what he said was that I thought for a long time when he was coming to Bible studies and various things around that we were slowly but inexorably arguing him into the kingdom point by point we were establishing the absolute validity of the Christian faith so as to make it totally irresistible to it so it's interesting to hear how it really happened and that God was doing the work all along it reminds me of a time when

[17 : 24] I was involved with a fellow at we were on a university mission in the University of Western Ontario back what seems like a long time ago and they picked the common room of one of the men's dorms and they put up big advertisements saying that I would be there and my friend David would be there and the subject for discussion was booze broads and the bomb and we anticipated that that was what everybody wanted to talk about and we thought we'd start there and see where we got to well the very first question was if Cain and Abel were the first children who did they marry now all the reason

I tell you that is that I think a lot of people use these kinds of arguments to cover up or to hide what's really going on in their hearts and lives they didn't want to talk about booze because that was too close to them they didn't want to talk about broads because that's I must say as I think about it that was long before anybody ever thought of the feminist movement I we probably been lynched if you tried a title like that now but anyway they didn't they that was too close and the bomb was too big to consider and so they got involved and that's I'm afraid in this business of religion that's what we spent an awful lot of time doing and that is arguing peripheral issues because people will not get down to what is on their heart the thing that is happening to them in a deeply personal way and to get to the point where they can articulate it where they can understand it where they get to know what's going on

I want to tell you to start with tonight at least a process that I think that people go through we had a I must tell you this we had this meeting for the seniors of our congregation this week just Tuesday afternoon and in the course of it I explained to them what it is that there are two ways to live one is under the authority of God the forgiveness of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the other is living under your own authority for your own purposes and at the conclusion of this little talk I asked them to say this prayer with me which they had in front of them which talked about rebelling against God and one of them came up to me afterwards and said

I really like that prayer only I have never rebelled against God and that's after seventy and more years that's a pretty good record somehow if you haven't I urge you to because I know who will win the difficulty is for most of us is that we get so pious and so religious that we don't understand the reality of the God who confronts us in Jesus Christ start an argument rebel start if you want that God does not exist somewhere this summer when we were at when I was taking some lectures from Harry Blamires out at Regent College he pointed out that

John Robinson the famous honest to God man of the 60s said in a later book that there was never any time in his life when he doubted the existence of God now Harry Blamires was understandably very very very angry because his book honest to God had caused all sorts of other people to doubt the existence of the God that John Robinson said I've never doubted it why did he write the book well I guess he wrote it to disturb people and it certainly did that but the point that he was making was that he wonders if people who have never doubted the existence of God really know who he is I don't there is many many reasons why you might justifiably doubt the existence of

[22 : 53] God there are many reasons why you might resent the existence of God and those reasons lie very deep in our hearts and in our lives and I think we have to come up against them I want to show you a little process that you could go through and I work this out not very extensively but there are people who are known as existentialists and they consider the whole of life to be totally observed because they have discovered the impenetrable purposeless universe around them and so they say that the whole of life is totally observed now these people are nice people you know they travel on public transit systems they pay for advertising they have respectable homes they raise children but down in their heart they have this secret cold understanding that the whole thing is totally observed and when things go badly for them they resort to that reality then there are people who are atheists and the difficulty with being an atheist is that and

Van Elken in a book which is available to you over there says about atheists the big difficulty is that it requires faith and he said it's a highly indefensible kind of faith because if you're going to argue it's a whole lot easier to be on the side of those who believe that there is God than the people who believe that there isn't and so he says having faith that there isn't a God you don't get much for it so what's the use so being an atheist is hard work but some people nevertheless take that position then there's the position of the agnostic the one who believes that nothing is or can be known concerning God or future life I remember when the honest to John book yeah that's a good name for it was the honest to

God book by John Robinson was in its heyday I was meeting with some clergy of the Anglican church in a little seminar we were having together discussing various problems and during the course of it I mentioned God several times and quite seriously one of my fellow rectors of one of the parishes in downtown Toronto leaned over to me and said Harry this God concept just what do you mean by that he became a social worker shortly after well that was true and characteristic of a large part of the time that many of you have been alive and well and sort of seeing what's happening if you are if you regard the world as absurd if you consider yourself an atheist if you consider yourself an agnostic you might be a philosopher and a philosopher's definition of

God totally impersonal but fairly precise is that God if he is must be the union of absolute good and absolute power well I like that but and that sentence comes from a book by Archbishop William Temple and he goes on and develops a very interesting argument in that book which says if the God who if the whole of the universe the whole of the cosmos is created by the union of absolute good and absolute power then that that God has in some way to make himself known to us there has got to be a person or an event in which that abstract concept confronts us in history and he says that person and that event is

Jesus Christ and his cross and so you can move to the to faith in God through the revelation of God in the God event which is the cross of Jesus Christ his death and resurrection the person of Jesus Christ his cross his death and his resurrection well that's a process by which we need to be awakened to reality God desires and I'm quoting from a member of this congregation who wrote this down for me God desires that we wake up to the eternal and the true and the difficulty that is pointed out that we have in doing this is that we have been stupefied by the pleasures of life even though at the same time we are numbed by the raw hurts that surround us we are lulled by the visible beauty that surrounds us we are seduced by dreams and possibilities of what could be and God desires that we wake up to the eternal and the true and

[29 : 38] Scott Peck who is a psychiatrist who wrote The Road Less Traveled says that all mental illness is at root and inability to accept reality so mental health must be to grasp reality with our minds and with our hearts so that our life is based on it and the purpose of this mission is to contend that that reality is Jesus Christ is to put their faith in him that ultimately man must put his faith in him man and him because Jesus Christ is the one whose name is above every name that he is the person in whom the

God of the whole universe makes himself known now in explaining all that to you which is very cursory I'm sure I have suggested to you reasons why you might believe in God if you were to turn to the passage that we're studying tonight from Psalm 107 you will see how even if you're not philosophically inclined you might still get to the place of a profound awareness of the existence of God and that's the passage in the bulletin that you have where it begins some went down to the sea in ships doing business on the great water ships were not very much favored by the Jewish people that's why when Jonah wanted to get away from God he took a ship well you know where he ended up but he wanted to get away from the presence of God and the sea becomes a kind of symbol of raw natural uncontrolled uninstitutionalized unmanageable power just some of you no doubt have been on the west coast that long beach and there you see a little cluster of rocks about half a mile out over the flat sand and the sea beyond it appears to be almost dead caught with only very slow rollers coming in but when those slow almost imperceptible rollers hit one of those clumps of rock there's a tremendous burst of energy and water flies hundreds of feet into the air to show the tremendous power that belongs to the sea well that's why they didn't like the sea it was a place of high adventure on the one hand it was a place of high risk it was a place where you became aware as a

Derek Kidner says that we live by permission and not by good management and what he means is that we live in the midst of tremendous forces tremendous natural power and that that natural power can just eliminate us so fast as to almost terrify you I don't know if you've ever been in Niagara Falls and one place on the streets of that city you can get up very close to the river where you see the water going over and dropping down and the awesome power of that water terrifies you even from 25 feet away well that's the kind of thing that the sea had for them and still have some went down to the sea in ships doing business on the great waters they saw the deeds of the Lord his wondrous works in the deep he commanded and raised the stormy wind which lifted up the waves of the sea they mounted up to heaven they went down to the depths their courage melted away in their evil plight they reeled and staggered like drunken men and were at their wits end

I think that what this is saying is that life demands adventure adventure involves risk and risk ultimately proves to be very very worthwhile because it brings you to the place where you begin to understand who God is you see the process of adventure risk putting yourself because that's what they went to the sea above they went down to the sea in ships to do business they knew that to be able to send a ship off to a far country to trade and to bring it back was one of the ways that you could become fabulously rich but you could only become fabulously rich if you were prepared to venture and that's what needed to be done well that's the story of the adventure but the adventure doesn't go at first the way you want it to the winds come and lift up the the waves of the sea almost to the sky and men get to the point where the power of nature around them is so overwhelming that they fear for their lives they lose control they come to the end of all their skill and ability and they're taught to and fro remember when Dr Lovelace was here two months ago he said that's what the economy is today he said people don't even begin to know how the economy works they used to think they knew how it worked but now they are caught as victims of it and they are tossed to and fro by it and they don't know where they are but the experience of high adventure and high risk brings you to the end of your human resources and all the way through this psalm the end of your human resources has been the beginning of something radically new and we live such lives that we never come anywhere near the end of our resources we keep ourselves secure and surrounded and cared for and loved that we never try anything very exciting we never face up to reality the reality that God has confronted us in Jesus

Christ and the highest possible adventure that we could ever stake out for our lives is to put our faith utterly and unconditional in the person who said to the rich young ruler you want eternal life go and take all that you have and sell it and give to the poor and come and follow me now that's high adventure and that's the kind of thing that Jesus Christ said he said if you want life then lose it that's high adventure that's adventure of the kind that most of us guard ourselves from all our lives and so God has to break in with tremendous power to show us who he is and to show us what he wants our lives to be

[38 : 17] I have a letter here which I'd like to read to you and to show you how in a way very similar to Psalm 107 it's dated the 25th of September 1985 and it comes from a lady whom I know but it was written to a friend of mine and she lived in Mexico City and God in a wonderful way got her full attention and I'll tell you how by reading you the letter it was 720 a.m.

I was out at a small park walking briskly and planning to do some exercises one of the few good habits I picked up suddenly I felt dizzy just as suddenly I realized it wasn't me but the ground and at that moment everything but everything began to move and sway violently including me I looked up and the high rise apartments across the street from me were banging against each other nothing was falling but the sound of glass breaking concrete scraping wires crackling seemed deafening I did not know what to do I felt that I was searching wildly for some place of safety but at the same time frozen with inner panic consuming my whole being I noticed a little old lady a few feet in front of me in the same state she suddenly knelt down on the sidewalk and began to pray

I ran to her knelt down and did the same she in Spanish me only able to repeat over and over rapidly dear lord Jesus the ground was moving so forcefully that my knees were scraped and bruised by the time it was over just then two feet beside us a large iron lamppost came crashing down we jumped up looking frantically around no place to go so hugged and held on to each other until the movement stopped poor lady I think I crushed her she came up to my chin gracias adios we at least had each other when the heavy movement stopped wires tv antennas and trees continued moving for some time in total it lasted seven minutes it felt and I do not exaggerate like an eternity

I've been through three others not more than three minutes each only enough time to realize earthquake head for the door to leave the building and it would be over not enough time to become frightened but this when finally over the little lady and I both speaking rapidly at the same time managed to calm each other down kiss and say thank you to God and we departed the letter goes on and says further I cannot properly describe what it is truly like I have never been more grateful for my life than at this moment for the past few months I've been striving to develop my spiritual life and now spend time every day in communication with God do believe that all is well or will be well I do believe that all is well or will be well that God's will be done that he has a plan for us and will always look after us if we walk with him now

I know that lady she works for an advertising firm in Mexico City and she's a very sophisticated kind of lady in the normal way of sophisticated ladies in our day and she's not I would never have thought particularly religious but given a little shaking she discovered a reality in her life that I don't think she ever suspected was there and I I'm saying this to you because I'm sure that you and me given a little shaking might discover a reality which we don't know is there a reality about our life a reality about who we are most people think that it's quite that it's quite wrong to come to the place where you cry out to God in your trouble

[43 : 20] I want to tell you it's not wrong it's the place you were meant to come to you were born in order to come to that place where you cry out to God it's not unlike Jesus cry from the cross my God my God why hast thou forsaken me you were meant to come to that place so that you might know who God is so that you might go from the absurdity of life from atheism and agnosticism to a trust in God such a rudimentary kind of trust because you have experienced the reality of who he is and having experienced the reality of who he is you come to that part of the psalm which says he hears and he delivers you have ventured out into the storm you have chosen to go for this high adventure you find yourself totally overwhelmed not knowing where to turn you cry out to

God and God acts and at that moment you understand what God is all about who Jesus Christ is fascinating to me that this lady prayed dear Lord Jesus sometimes in our hearts we know way more than we know in our heads our heads are full of arguments and rationalization and in our hearts there may be a reality which we have to be shaken to discover well that's what happened to her and and if you look at the letter parallels in human experience what the psalm tells you in scripture and it says he made the storm be still the waves of the sea were hush they were glad because they had quiet and he brought them to their desired haven and there they worship

God thinking of the great power of the sea I would like you now to sing hymn 74 please be seated in John chapter 6 there's the other side of this story and it's it can't help but but come out of this story and must be read with it and it tells the story of Christ coming to his disciples on the water perceiving it says in verse 15 of chapter 6 perceiving they were about to come and take him by force and make him king Jesus withdrew again to the mountains by himself and it's not surprising that he withdrew to the mountains by himself because how can you make him a king who is already king of kings and lord of lords how can you do it and his disciples set out across the sea of

Galilee in a ship and as they went darkness came and with darkness the sea rose a strong wind was blowing and they were rowing and making heavy weather of it and they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat and they were frightened but he said to them it is I do not be afraid you see that's that's what that's the whole picture isn't it it's the whole picture of you and and I as the disciples of Jesus Christ setting out upon a venture coming to the place where we are overcome and can no longer cope getting to the place where we're staggering like drunken men where we are at our wits end and in that situation God meets us in Jesus

Christ the only way you could argue that point with me is if you've been there and it didn't happen and I know many of you could stand up and say that you have been there and it did happen and that's something that we need to know that's what life is about when we come to the end of ourselves we've only come to the beginning of God's purpose for us in Christ and that's why I think in both the psalm which we read where it says he brought them to their desired haven and in the gospel it says then they were glad to take him into the boat and immediately the boat was at the land of which they were going now I think there's something very profound about that because when in your extremity you meet

[49 : 36] Jesus Christ you suddenly find that you are right now where you're going going do you see what I mean I give you eternal life everything belongs to you right now because of Jesus Christ you are where you're going and if you are where you're going there's nothing left to be afraid of is there so that in the middle of our life when we've come to the end humanly speaking we've come to the end and Christ draws near and goes with us because of that we are where we're going and no longer is life a kind of valiant struggle against the inevitable victory of death and sin life becomes right now in a measure what it's ultimately going to be you arrive where you're going and the reality for you and me the reality that God wants to bring us to is the reality of his eternal purposes in us here and now his finished work in us here and now and that's that's what the epilogue service is about that you might you might set out on this high adventure of being a disciple of Jesus

Christ of being willing to be to trust him wholly and completely you know when people contract disease and they look at the inevitable progress of that disease they don't want to get to the place where they're no longer in control where they are dependent where they are enfeeble where their mind is gone nobody wants to do that but spiritually we need to do that we need to get to the place where we are utterly dependent utterly dependent upon God God and he wants to bring us to that place and he as you will see from this passage is a powerful

God if you're interested the epilogue service is an opportunity for you to look at what's involved in a commitment of your life to such an adventure to trust in Christ and if you are interested in simply renewing your life in Christ I invite you to come renewing your discipleship renewing your unashamed commitment to him and I invite you to stay for the epilogue service which is going to be over there right afterwards very simple very straightforward and you're inviting