

The Sting 10am

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[0 : 0 0] Our God and Father, I know that if we were standing before some great work of art that we had never seen in our lives before, we would be filled with awe. But we now stand before a passage of Scripture and the awesome response that it deserves. It's hard to imagine that it could come from our jaded hearts. And so we ask that your Holy Spirit will renew us within and that you will allow us by that Holy Spirit to see the wonder of the things that are set before us in this Scripture. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

The passage is 1 Corinthians 15 verse 51 to 58. A most amazing passage, the whole of chapter 15. And David has done a brilliant job in working through it. And I'm sorry, as probably you are, that he's not here this morning. But he left off last week with verse 50. And verse 50 of chapter 15 says, I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the kingdom of the imperishable. First let me remind you of who it is that's speaking. It's St. Paul. And he is, he has in his time in history, he was a Pharisee, a Greek and Aramaic speaking Jew, a citizen of the Roman Empire, a lifelong student of the scriptures as a Pharisee. At one time in his life, he was totally opposed to the Christian faith and sought to eliminate it.

He was standing as a witness when Stephen, the first martyr, he was a man who subsequently was radically changed and transformed after an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

He was struck blind by that experience, spent three days in fasting, his sight was returned to him.

[2 : 5 8] He spent 17 years of study. He's among the most brilliant men of the ancient world. He was executed in Rome.

As a recognition, perhaps, of his brilliance in a perverse kind of way. So that's who you're listening to as you read these verses. And then I want you to have a picture of who it is he is talking about. And he is talking about a people whose wisdom and understanding of life was magnificently expressed in that passage of scripture, which you have read this morning with Dan from Ecclesiastes chapter one.

And that's the recurring chorus of vanity of vanities, all is vanity. And that's the conclusion that Solomon, the wisest of men and richest of kings, came to.

And his words have articulated the conclusion that countless generations of men and women have all come to. Meaninglessness of meaninglessness of meaninglessness.

[4 : 2 4] All is meaningless. And in our own culture and in our own society, everything is meaningless.

It doesn't matter what you do because it's meaningless anyway. So why bother? And that kind of pervasive sense of meaninglessness undergirds the whole of our society.

And all you do is get like the flashes of a meteor against the summer sky as some brilliant person does some brilliant thing. And then it disappears as quickly as it came.

And vanity of vanities returns. That's what we subscribe to. That's what the wisdom of our age lives in denial of it, but at heart it believes it.

And those who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ have reason to say that life is meaningless.

Because it is apart from that gospel.

[5 : 3 2] So that's who it is we're speaking to. And what does Paul have to say? He says, Behold, I show you a mystery.

Now a mystery is primarily something which that you can't by yourself understand.

Our world is too proud to think that there are such things. But Paul isn't proud. It doesn't suggest that about us. He says there are things that we can't understand.

And he wants to put before us one of them. But he wants to put it before you in the same way that the writer of a detective story takes a crime.

And you can't for the life of you figure out how it works. And then the detective goes to work and brings all the clues and all the evidence together and finally explains it.

[6 : 34] So this mystery is one that you look at with total incomprehension. And Paul slowly puts it together in such a way that you can see what the mystery is and what it means.

It's a mystery as to how God is going to achieve what he has purposed to achieve. But it's that he is going to do it.

Paul affirms. He's going to achieve it. We don't know how. What then is it that he's going to achieve? And if you look carefully at the text, you will see that there is a change.

In Ecclesiastes, you read, there is nothing new under the sun. And Paul is saying that here in the middle of history is an event which is totally new.

And you need to begin to relate to the reality of that which is totally new. But he says in order for this reality to be effective, a change has to take place.

[7 : 50] And so he says, Paul, if you put together the whole of 1 Corinthians 15, you'll see the dimensions of the change that have to take place.

One body for another body. And you see, what Paul was doing, and please try and get this figured out.

Everybody speculates about the possibility of life after death. I mean, whether you ever go to church or not, you can't help but speculate about it.

And the world is full of human speculation about the possibility of life after death. And every religion has some concept of life after death.

And all sorts of films and stories imply the possibility of life after death. But Paul is saying what it is. And he's saying that it is the resurrection of the body.

[9 : 01] That the whole totality of a person is changed so as to move from the categories of flesh and blood to the categories of standing as an embodied person in the presence of God.

So he has, so Paul says, a change has to take place. One body for another body. What is perishable has to become imperishable.

And he's referring primarily to the reality that at death our bodies perish. They are corrupted. And that perishable has to become imperishable.

Dishonor has to be changed for glory. Weakness has to be changed to power. The physically dominated body has to become a Holy Spirit dominated body.

The man of dust has to become the man of heaven. The life bound for death has to be changed to a death bound for life.

[10 : 17] The mortal has to become immortal. And the corrupt has to become incorrupt. And that's the change that has to take place.

And so what Paul is saying, and the reason you, when you say the Apostles' Creed, say, I believe in the resurrection of the body, means that you subscribe to what Paul is saying here.

We say that in the Creed because Paul demonstrates how it happens here. The resurrection of the resurrection of the body. And so when Paul has stated that the mystery is that a change which we can't comprehend, we can know God will affect by his own means and in his own way and in fulfillment of his own purpose.

Then it goes on in the passage to say, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed.

So that there is, there comes, time ends in eternity. David told you, I think, one week or two weeks ago about the fact that for us, scripture teaches that at the point of death is the point of resurrection.

[11 : 49] But you see, the reason that you can say that is that with death, time comes to an end and eternity begins.

So there's always a conflict trying to explain a moment of eternity which breaks into a moment of time. And that's what he's talking about when he says, at that moment of eternity, in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, it will happen.

That's when the two intersect. If you can talk about a moment of eternity and a moment of time, they come together. So that is when the change takes place.

And then Paul goes on to explain that all this will come to pass. And if you look at the text, you will see that these things come to pass.

The perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, the mortal with immortality. The saying that is written will come true. So long and you want to know where Paul got this information from.

[13 : 14] He got it from the scriptures of the Old Testament. He's not teaching what isn't taught in the Old Testament. And so he says, that saying, which was written for our learning back in the scriptures of the Old Testament, will come true.

The particular verse is Hosea chapter 13, verse 14, where you can look it up. And Paul adapts what's said there when he writes that this is what will come to pass.

And he says, death has been swallowed up in victory. We think of death as jaws.

You know, everybody talks about the jaws of death. And coming under the, you know, coming within range of the jaws of death. And the jaws of death close.

And that's the end. And we keep thinking of death as something which ultimately will swallow us up. And death is something which is waiting to swallow us up.

[14 : 21] And so he talks about that. But then you see what Paul says is he turns that around and says, no, it's not that the jaws of death are waiting to swallow you up.

But that death itself will be swallowed up. Death belongs to time. Death belongs to our perishable nature.

Death belongs to flesh and blood. Death belongs to these. But death itself, Paul says, will be swallowed up. And from there he goes on to say, oh, death, where is your sting?

Now, you all know what a sting is because it becomes the theme of lots of movies to set up a sting. You can do that on film very easily to demonstrate a sting.

But if you want to see the original sting, you look at chapter 3 of Genesis. And here is Adam and Eve in the garden.

[15 : 28] Everything was created and brought before them. All of God's creation was open to them. They were put in a place of ultimate satisfaction and relationship to God.

And in comes the devil with the sting. The serpent, as he's called, who has the sting. And when Adam and Eve described to him the circumstances of their captivity in the garden as he regards it, he says to them, did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?

And you see he's getting them ready for the sting. And the woman said, oh, we can eat of any tree we want in the garden. But it's just that we're not to eat of this particular tree.

That's what God said. And he said that if we did, we would surely die. That's what he told us. And Satan said, you will not surely die.

God couldn't be God if he thought of such a thing to do. And so he says, you will not surely die. And then he goes on to say, God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be open.

[16 : 45] You will be like God. And you will yourself know the difference between good and evil. You won't have to have reference to anyone else.

You won't have to be subject to anybody's law. You won't have to be subject to anybody's commands. You will know yourself. You will be as a God. And Adam and Eve said, we'll buy that. And the sting was in. And death followed. And that's what Paul picks up and tells them when he says, death, where is your sting?

He says, the sting of death is sin. That is, choosing to live a life in deliberate disobedience to God. And he said, the strength of the sin is the law.

And he said, and you know that it's the law that articulates the reality of your life. That what you are doing because of your self-centered nature, you know is wrong because of your awareness of the law.

[17 : 55] And so that's what happened. The sting of death is sin. The power of sin is the law. And then he goes back to the jaws of death concept.

And he says, but thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. The victory over death. Death is a defeated and vanquished enemy.

And so Paul concludes in a very practical way by saying, and it's extremely practical. And it's exactly the opposite of what Ecclesiastes had said about the emptiness and meaninglessness of life.

He said, life finally takes on meaning once you recognize that it is God's purpose to effect a change whereby death is defeated and life is granted.

And so Paul concludes this amazing chapter with these very practical words. He says, therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord.

[19 : 15] Because that's all that ultimately counts. Always abounding in the work of the Lord. For as much as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Your life is not in vain. The struggles and the suffering and the misery. The stress and tension and difficulty which seem to be compounded together in many of our lives.

That is not ultimately in vain. That is, it is part of God's purpose that you should, that in all that, you will recognize that your labor and struggle is not in vain.

Because it brings you to the place where God wants you to be. Okay, let me finish with this.

Because I, this seems to me to be an important thing to say at this point.

And in saying it, I'm reading to you from a statement made by Archbishop William Temple. And he's talking about what you're doing right now.

[20 : 30] And he says this. The great aim of all true religion is to transfer the center of interest and concern from self to God.

Until the doctrine of God in its main elements is really established, it would be definitely dangerous to reach a developed doctrine of immortality.

The danger of preaching about immortality or speculating about immortality has implicit in it the great danger of moving from being an awareness of who God is and what he's doing to who I am. And he says, he goes on to say, even when the doctrine of God is established in its Christian form, the doctrine of immortality can still, as experience abundantly shows, perpetuate self-centeredness in your spiritual life.

If my main concern to things eternal is to be with the question, what is going to become of me, it might be better that I should have no hope of immortality at all.

[22 : 03] So that at least as I look forward into the vista of the ages, my self, capital S, should not be an object of primary interest.

You see, that's why you're, you know, this is why we're ambivalent in coming to church.

Because we come with the primary interest in ourselves, you know, focused in upon ourselves, feeling the sort of central dominance of self in our lives.

But when you come to church, you see, what you're asked to do, the central activity is, and William Temple quotes us, he says, it's to say, therefore with angels and with archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name, evermore praising thee and saying, holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.

We sing as we did this morning, praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation. Because the doctrine of immortality, which again, Temple says is not a doctrine of immortality, it's the doctrine of the resurrection.

[23 : 27] That doctrine requires us not to become self-concerned about the consequences of it in our lives, because that is God's business.

How and when and where and under what circumstances this change will be effected. But our business is to give praise to such a God who in his grace and in his mercy and in his love has ordained that death should be defeated and the victory of the grave should be denied and that our life should be a life which is given to the praise of the God who is.

That's why, you see, it says, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because that's what's important. It's not be steadfast and unmovable, always involved in personal introspection or anxiety about yourself, but it's to be given totally to the praise and worship of God. And that's why he concludes that chapter, which I repeat by saying, therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

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