

The Sting 8am

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Our God and Father, as we turn to your word this morning, we're very mindful that our ears are full of noise and clamor and all sorts of things pressing in upon us.

But we ask that you will give us the grace that by your Holy Spirit you may burn into our hearts those things which are your purpose for us and our purpose before you.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. And then you have to turn, if you will, in your pew Bible to the passage which is the last few verses of 1 Corinthians 15, which is one of the amazing chapters of the whole of Scripture.

And in the passage we're looking at this morning, that chapter comes to a dramatic climax. And I want just to lead you through the dramatic climax, which is the end of chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians. The page number you will find in your bullet and if you haven't got it. So it's 1 Corinthians 15 following.

[1 : 22] I have a friend with whom I had lunch downtown this week, and I told him that I was going to preach on this passage concerning the resurrection.

And he said, oh, you won't have any trouble preaching on that, but people will have a lot of trouble hearing it. So I feel quite prepared to preach this sermon at this point.

I hope God has prepared you to hear it. Let me tell you first who is speaking, just to remind you.

This is St. Paul. He is a Pharisee, a Greek, an Aramaic-speaking Jew, a Roman citizen, a lifelong student of the Scriptures.

He lived part of his life totally opposed to the Christian faith and sought with all his energy to eliminate it. He was a witness at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

He was a man radically transformed after an encounter with the risen Christ. He experienced three days of blindness and fasting and then 17 years of study.

[2 : 48] He is among the most brilliant men of the ancient world. So that's who's writing this. This is no fool. This is, I would say, I say among the most brilliant men because I want to say the most brilliant man of the ancient world.

But because of his commitment to Jesus Christ, the world won't give him that title, which I think he deserves. So that's who's speaking.

Who is listening is you and me. And you have to make the description up of who it is that you are in listening to this.

The next question, what is he talking about? And he's talking about, he's taking on from the sort of condensed wisdom of the Old Testament.

Remember, this is Solomon who spoke in the words which you read in Ecclesiastes chapter one. And he concluded about the whole of life's experience. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

[3 : 56] Which in the New International Version, which says, meaninglessness. That the whole thing is meaningless. The whole of life is ultimately meaningless.

And it goes on to say, there is nothing new. Everything that is, was before. There is nothing new under the sun. Well, that's, and that's why ultimately all life is vanity.

And I think that by and large our culture and our society and our civilization subscribe to that view of life. That it is ultimately meaningless. And the only thing that we can do is to try and give to certain moments in our life some meaning.

Even though ultimately they will be obliterated as meaningless. So that's the point at which he starts. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

And then if you look at the text, you'll see what he's talking about. He's talking first about change. And the necessity of something that will interrupt the order of this omnipresent meaninglessness.

[5 : 13] And so he says, and this is where David left off in preaching last week. He left off with verse 50. I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

Which means neither in death nor in life can we inherit the kingdom of God. The corruptible. And, you know, that we are, I mean, he's just referring to the decomposition of a dead body that starts at the moment of death.

And he says, that decomposition cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Even you in all the vitality of your physical life cannot inherit the kingdom of God.

So there has to be a radical change. And he talks about that change. And David has covered a lot of it in the preaching he's done.

Which I think is the most helpful preaching I've ever heard on this chapter. So I commend to you David's tapes for the last few Sundays. What is the change?

[6 : 19] It's a change. These are all the things that Paul says. It's a change from one body to another totally different body. But it is a body.

And that's where he, you know, the world speculates endlessly about the possibility of life after death. And if we can't use our reason, we can use our imagination.

And if we can overcome our despair, we can use our hope. But it talks about it endlessly. The Apostles' Creed says, Now, because the mass of sort of the world's thinking is against that possibility, it is that that Paul focuses on.

That the resurrection involves a body. That there is a total renewal, total renewal and change of your personality so that it's still identified, but it is fundamentally changed.

So he says it's one body to another. It's from the perishable to the imperishable. It's from dishonor to glory. It's from weakness to power.

[7 : 43] This is all in 1 Corinthians 15. It's from a body that is dominated by our physicality, if there is such a word, to a body that is dominated by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

It is from the man of dust. From dust you came, and to dust you will return. From the man of dust to the man of heaven. It's from a life which is bound for death to a life which is bound for life.

It is from the mortal to the immortal. It is from the corrupt to the incorruptible. So that's the radical change that is to take place.

And that's why Paul writes and says, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we will all be changed.

And then he says that in a flash and the twinkling of an eye at the last trump, the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

[8 : 56] And he describes that change further. That this is a moment which will come to pass. Now, the difficulty is, David said that in one of his sermons in the last two weeks, is that the moment of our death is the moment of our resurrection.

And that belongs to this moment, which is described as the last trump, the twinkling of an eye. That this moment, you see, this moment doesn't belong to the process of time.

This moment belongs to eternity. And at the moment of our death, we too belong to eternity. Time is no longer of any significance.

So that's the change that has to take place. The difficulty that we all experience, and this is where Paul goes on and says, Behold, I show you a mystery.

The mystery is the thing that...

[10 : 16] Well, it's beyond knowledge. You remember how in 1 Corinthians it talks about, we know in part. Our generation and our time tends to think we know all there is to know.

And if you don't know it, you can get it on the internet. And so that we tend to think all that can be known is known. But for Paul, there's a vast amount that can be known that we can't know.

And among those things is how God will effect this change that has to take place. And he says we can't know it. It's a mystery how he will do it.

It's not a mystery, Paul says, that he will do it. It's only a mystery how he will do it. And we can't know that. And that's the way it is.

And that's why Paul calls it a mystery. If you look back at the text again, you will see that it says about...

[11 : 16] It says that death has been swallowed up in victory. Death has always been sort of conceived of as a great pair of jaws that ultimately closes in on us.

And that death swallows us up. And this is a constant picture of death, both in Scripture and out of Scripture. The idea that death is the great set of jaws that ultimately closes on us.

And so Paul reverses that and says, no, death itself is swallowed up in victory. That it's not we who will be swallowed up by death.

The ultimate reality is that death will be swallowed up by the victorious purpose of God in Jesus Christ. Then he goes on and says, where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting? Now, the sting, you know, and that's a popular theme for movies.

And there is a movie by that name. And if you can remember what it's about, that will be helpful to you at this point, I'm sure.

[12:28] But I can't remember what it's about. But that it was a sting. And the sting is described very well for us in the second chapter of, third chapter at least, of Genesis.

And the serpent is the one who puts in the sting, you see. Because Eve says, this is the way God created the world, and this is what God intended.

And the serpent says with ultimate rationality, did God really say that? That you mustn't eat from any tree of the garden?

So the sting is introduced. And as Eve went on and said that if you touch this, you will die, and the serpent says, oh, no, you surely won't die.

And then when the serpent goes on to say, God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, you will be like God, and you will know good and evil.

[13:38] And so he puts this thing in front of Eve and says, this is what it's really going to be like, and I want you to buy into that, you see. And so Adam and Eve buy into it, and the sting hits.

And instead of it being the source of life, as we still think it is, it becomes the source of death. And Paul goes on to say, and that reality is confirmed constantly by the recognition of the law.

So the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

So he has, he has, in a sense, drawn from our lives, from the life which God intended we should have, and which has been stung by death, he's drawn the sting from it, and removed death.

And now it's not death, but it is a change, a radical and basic change. So, with that, Paul then goes on to say, to this conclusion.

[15:02] Now, this is amazing, really, and it ties right back to Ecclesiastes chapter 1. But it goes back and says, in conclusion of this tremendous chapter, it gives this very practical result.

It says, therefore, because of all this, therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. You know, we shift all the time.

He says, don't shift from this hope that is ours in Christ. He says, stand firm. Let nothing move you. I'm sorry, I'm reading from the NIV, and you're reading from the RSV, but you can make the connection.

Be steadfast, unmovable, and we are very movable. I mean, we move all the time in our, as to where we are, and what we're convinced, and convicted about.

Be steadfast, unmovable. unmovable. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know, you see, that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

[16:12] So that the work that you do, you do on the basis of the fact that God has, God has overcome death in Christ, and it's not vanity of vanities or meaninglessness of meaninglessness.

It's, there is a profound meaning, because death has been overcome, and being steadfast, and immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord, because that is true.

It makes your life and my life meaningful to the extent that we are abounding in the work of the Lord. That that's the, that's the, the great purpose that ties all of time and all of history and all of our lives together.

He, he ends up by saying, this means that your labor is not in vain, that vanity of vanities is not the last word.

And I find lots of people like to read from Ecclesiastes at their funerals or want, or their friends want this read. But it's a, it's a, it's a, it's a, a failure to recognize that there is something beyond life, and life does not end, end in a meaningless heap of human vanity.

[17:40] Well, I've told you that, uh, might be interesting for you to know that the beginning of, uh, chapter 16 says, now concerning the collection, that's a wonderful step, isn't it?

I won't, I won't dwell on it, I just wanted to show it to you. Now, let me read to you as I conclude this, this passage, which, uh, which is written by Archbishop William Temple, to put this whole thing in perspective, because it needs to be put into perspective.

He writes, 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.

Uh, even when the doctrine of God is established in its Christian form, the doctrine of immortality can still, uh, as experience abundantly shows, perpetuate self-centeredness in spiritual worship.

[19 : 03] So that this doctrine of immortality, which he says later is not really the doctrine of immortality, it is the doctrine of the resurrection, he says, that it can still degenerate into, uh, perpetuation of self-centeredness in our lives.

He concludes, if my main concern in relationship 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, so that at least as I look forward into the vista of the ages, myself should not be an object of primary interest. So that what he's saying here is, and this you will, you will, uh, experience as you proceed with this service, what he's saying here is the doctrine of the resurrection is a joyful awareness of who God is and not an introspective awareness of who I am.

And that that comes in a sense to its full expression as far as this earth is concerned when, in the course of our liturgy, we come to that point where we say completely unmindful of our introspective selves, we say, therefore with angels, 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, heaven and earth are full of thy glory.

Glory be to thee, O Lord. It's a total awareness of the God who has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ.

[21 : 13] And that total awareness is the object of our faith, not some introspective concern about our own personal identity.

And so as you take part in this service, which it is your privilege to do, be mindful of the fact that this isn't a matter of the vanity of the basic vanity of life.

It is primarily a matter of giving praise to the God who has ordered a change that will be made. He has withdrawn the sting.

Death has been defeated, and out. Our God reigns. Amen.