

An End to Death

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 May 2023

Preacher: Graeme Shanks

- [0 : 0 0] Well, folks, come back to me with those two of those verses in John chapter 8. You know, one of the many reasons that people the world over have found such wonderful comfort in Jesus is that if you spend any amount of time with him, you'll soon run into somebody who speaks into the very biggest issues which we face in our lives.
- Right. And today we're going to think about the biggest one that faces all of us. Now, if you turned on BBC One about eight o'clock last Sunday night, you'll have tuned into the biggest party in the country.
- Now, I think we'll all agree that the King's Coronation Party as an event was absolutely superb. So the great and the good of British society were there. Shimming away in the royal box.
- Take that and Lionel were reminding us all once again that they really are the gift that keeps on giving. And if you watch that evening, halfway through, what you will have seen is Prince William give his short speech.
- And if you listened carefully enough to that speech, you'll have heard him use a line, a line to describe the late Queen. And this line really got me thinking.
- [1 : 2 5] He said this. He said really simply, I know she's up there fondly keeping an eye on us. And the crowd cheered and the royal box nodded away.
- And I have to admit that something deep inside of me, as I responded emotionally in the moment, wanted to do exactly the same. And yet I heard him say it.
- And I thought to myself, when the dust settled on the emotion, I thought to myself, how do you know? How do you know that she's up there?
- Now, notwithstanding what would appear to be the genuineness of the Queen's faith in Jesus, what William declared to be true in that moment is so revealing of how so often we as human beings try and square the circle of the inevitability of death.
- Now, two things as I see it and as I live my life in the world and as I speak to different people, there are two things that we are often inclined to do when we think about death. Here's the first one. The first one is simply to deny it.
- [2 : 3 4] And we use lines, don't we? Like they've just moved upstairs. It was their time to go. They're now dancing with the angels. You know, someone said to me recently, and see if you think this is true or not, that in a generation past, everyone talked about and was aware of death and sex and sexuality was taboo.
- Now, generations on, we've completely flipped it, haven't we? That everybody wants to talk about sex and sexuality. You're kind of strange if you don't, but death is taboo.
- Let's not talk about it. We try and deny it. Or secondly, and I think this is true to say it's a lot more common in my generation, the other response is to defy it.
- Because we recognize that life is short and you hear people say that you only live once and they shorten it down to YOLO. And so they say, make your life count.

You've got to make your life count. Again, it's interesting. Somebody said to me from a previous generation that it was common for people to have one job for life. Many of us will know family members, friends who had one job for life.

[3 : 49] It was the same for me, for my dad, for his dad. One job for life. And yet now, according to recent statistics, did you know that the average person will have 12 jobs during their lifetime in this generation?

5.7 careers. Now, listen, I'm not saying that there are bad reasons for making a job change. I did it. But so often, isn't it birthed from a desire to do something fulfilling and rewarding as we react to our three score in 10 existence?

And we find ourselves in the West, certainly, living in what people have dubbed today as the new age of uncertainty. You'll have seen that there's billionaires in Silicon Valley at the minute investing their time and their precious money into life extension research under the banner of we think we can cheat death.

Right? Guy from Amazon. Guy from Google. It's what they're investing in just now. Trying to cheat death. So do you see it? Is this ringing true, what we try and do as human beings?

We either deny it or we defy it. And yet, is it not true that death, it still lurks like a shadow over us. It gets its pain into us.

[5 : 05] We feel it. And we know it's not right. So let me ask you this morning, how do you process it? You see, into our hopeless chasm where we don't know where to run, where we go looking for answers in all the wrong places, Jesus steps with real life-giving words of hope.

And boy, do we need these this morning as a church family. You might need them in a way that I just don't know, particularly in your life right now. Many of us with friends and family who are just suffering just now, don't know what tomorrow holds.

Our dear friends just now, don't know what tomorrow holds. But there's wonderful comfort for those for whom this is real and for some of us this morning for whom this is really raw in what Jesus says.

Because of Jesus, friends, we are a community of hope. That is the defining feature, one of the defining features of our church family.

And it's a wonderful evangelistic opportunity in a world that doesn't know where the answers are, that we can shine because Christ shines in us, the light of the world as we thought about at the beginning of chapter eight.

[6 : 32] And we are a beacon of hope. And this morning, I want you to know and celebrate and breathe in the truth that Jesus says, don't deny it, don't defy it, know and trust that I've come to deal with it.

And here's what he says, verse 51, and this is the key verse. And if you go away from one thing this morning, may it be this verse, verse 51. He says this really simply, very truly, I tell you, and we'll come back to this, that whoever obeys my words will never see death.

We thought about how humanity, we are lost in darkness. That was kind of the first part of chapter eight. Then we thought about last week, how we are slaves to our sin.

This week, we are thinking about the inevitability of death. And there is the human condition right there. And into that gap steps Jesus who says, I am the light of the world. I am the one who's come to free you from sin.

And I am the one who's come to lead you through death. And it's wonderful, the hope that the risen Jesus holds out to us today. And if we're to feel the full impact of this and embrace the refreshing hope that's on offer today in his words, we need to get our heads around this man called Abraham.

[7 : 53] You see, he's the central debating point in this discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees. Now, let me just say, just in case you're thinking of switching off at this point, if we get our heads around him, and this will just be five, ten minutes this morning thinking about him and the shape of his life, not only will that take us right to the center of the Christian faith, but it will take us to the beating heart of the great Christian hope.

Because the Pharisees, if you want to understand, in the passage, they have got this man, Abraham, according to Jesus, they've got him all wrong. Come with me to the passage. You see, they think that they are right with God because of the fact that Abraham is in their family tree.

So something of his DNA is in their physical bodies. And Jesus challenges them in this passage to think about the fact that they're asking themselves the wrong question.

The question is not, are you descended from him physically? The question is, are you related to him spiritually?

Now, we meet this man, Abraham, and his wife, Sarai, in the very first book of the Bible called Genesis. And they come on the end of chapter 11, beginning of chapter 12.

[9 : 18] Now, they come on the scene, and we have to understand this, against the backdrop of Noah and the flood, and against the backdrop of the Tower of Babel.

Both episodes scream to us that rebellion against God has taken over humanity's hearts. And human beings in that backdrop have no right, no expectation to get anything from God other than judgment.

And into this backdrop steps the Lord of grace. And God makes Abraham a promise, a promise that through him, all the nations, all the peoples of the world, will be blessed.

Now, if you just want to think about this now, look around the room. I wonder if we did a show of hands this morning. Of all the different countries that we were born in, where would that put us? And you begin to see just how this is a microcosm of what God has promised here for the world.

And that's a big promise, isn't it? As he thinks about the world, I mean, none of this kind of starts small and build it up. God just goes straight in there and says, from you I'm going to make a great nation.

[10 : 34] I'm going to bless the peoples of the world. Do you want to do that? What I want you to do, Abraham, is I want you to go. I want you to go. I want you to come and I want you to follow me to the land where I am taking you.

And that is the greatest defining feature about the land. What is it? It's about the fact that God is there. So God is saying, come and find me.

Come on a journey to where I am taking you. We need to understand that that is the goal of the Christian life. It is not stuff. It is not self-improvement. The goal of the Christian life, and we'll come back to this, is to be with our God and to know him.

And God says to Abraham, I am your great reward. And the thing is that Abraham is 75 at this point.

Now he's no spring chicken. Right? And so God is asking him to leave the security of his life, everything that he knows, his family, his home, and leave it all behind and stake it all on this promise.

[11 : 44] And he chooses to go. And you fast forward a couple of chapters to Genesis 15. God reiterates that promise.

And he says, go out, go out, Abraham, and look at the stars. Now he's not a city center. We need to understand. He's way in the middle of the Middle East and desert. Right? Counting the stars.

Right? Have you ever had that experience of being out in the middle of nowhere? No light pollution. Get a cracking view of the stars. God says, count them. I love to think that Abraham took that challenge up.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. And then he eventually got the point of what God was saying. You've got no idea, Abraham, what I'm going to do. It's just so much bigger than you can get your head around.

But I want you to stake it all in the fact that you can trust who I am. God's promising Abraham a people. He's promising him a place. And he's promising that through him, blessing and favor will come to the world.

[12 : 46] And the key line is at verse six of Genesis 12, that Abraham believed God. He trusted God.

And it was counted to him as righteousness. So he is right with God. Because he believed and he acted on what God has said.

And let's be honest, he had every reason not to. God is saying that from him, I mean, it's all well saying it, that he's going to bless the world from him. It's going to come a great nation. But the reality of it is that he doesn't even have a son at this point.

And Sarah's getting old. She's not getting pregnant anytime soon. So what did Abraham have to go on? He had nothing other to go on than God's unchanging character.

Wonderful truth about our God is that he doesn't change. It's not like our tastes.

[13 : 54] Have you ever had that experience when you dig up an old photo album or on your iPhone, it comes up, this is what you were doing 15 years ago. And you think to yourself, what was I wearing? Why did I think double denim was cool? Our tastes change.

We change. But this God stays the same. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. This God is faithful. That's why C.S. Lewis, and I love it in his famous line, he famously said, that anything that is not eternal is eternally out of date.

And this God never changes. He is faithful. And that means if God pledges himself to something, if he commits himself to something, or to use the biblical term, if he covenants himself to something, then it's a done deal.

It's a done deal. And so Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what he said he'd do. Abraham, and I think this is where this is beginning to connect with us this morning, he sees his little life in the context and in light of the bigger story of God's plans and purposes in and for the world.

So often what I know the mistake that I make, so often I just get focused on my little story. And Abraham has been a wake-up call for me this week to think about my place because of God's grace in his bigger story.

[15 : 32] Right? You've had that experience when you walk in halfway through a film and you say to yourself, I haven't watched it for two minutes, I don't get this, it doesn't make any sense. Right?

Alex will tell you that is my worst trait. But of course you don't get it. You've only walked in and saw two minutes of the thing. You need to take in the whole thing. You've only seen a tiny slither of it.

And I think it's exactly the same with our lives. Abraham's life becomes all about God's bigger story and faith and looking forward and trusting that somehow through his offspring, God would act to bring about those promises.

And so that's why Jesus says, verse 56, Abraham, and this is a huge claim. Don't miss it.

We just read it in our English versions. This was dynamite in the day when Jesus said it. Verse 56, Abraham rejoiced. Do you see it in the text? Abraham rejoiced to see my day.

[16 : 41] He saw it and was glad. Glad. In other words, Abraham was saved because he lived his life looking forward and anticipating and rejoicing in my arrival and what I'm going to accomplish and what I'm going to do through my death and resurrection.

And so if you've ever wondered how people in the Old Testament times were saved, this passage is your answer. They were saved in exactly the same way that we are, except, sorry, exactly the same way as we are, trusting and rejoicing in Jesus' day, except they were looking forward and we are looking back.

We are trusting in the work of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection for us to bring us to God.

Wherever you are in history, that is the moment that you are looking to. And as the question for us, do we rejoice as we think about that day? We're going to think about another day in a minute, but do we rejoice when we think about, this is what we try and do in the opening, all of our service, but particularly the opening section, celebrate the gospel.

We rejoice to see Jesus' day. And so here is the biblical definition of faith. It is trust based on evidence.

[18 : 15] It is walking in light of the promises of God. And it's with one eye in the future. That's what it is to be God's people of faith.

Do we need to be reminded of that today? People of faith, a community of faith. Do you know what the most annoying question on the long car journey is? Normally it comes from the back seat.

Are we there yet? Yeah, and you think to yourself as a parent, when you hear it, man, this is going to be a long one. Don't forget the border. We're not even at the bypass yet. Are we there yet?

But I take it there's a sense as we journey together in this life of faith, that we're always to be mindful like that child in the car of that final destination.

Now, whatever is going on in our lives today, whatever tomorrow holds, we need to understand that the most sure thing about our lives is that they will end with us in the presence of Jesus.

[19 : 28] That is the most important thing about your life today. If your faith is in him, that's where the journey is ending. You might not know what tomorrow holds. You might be really fearful about the future, that that is where the story ends.

It's where it ends with him. He is our great reward, is Jesus. You know, my friend Tim is here this morning. Tim's over here.

Tim works for Open Doors, working with persecuted Christians all over the world, thinking about how to support them and pray for them. Oh, you can speak to him after the service. He'll tell you stories, more about his work.

But I've often wondered for our dear brothers and sisters in places like North Korea, in places living in the Middle East, all over the world, what is it that gets you through?

What is it that holds you together when all of life seems uncertain, when so many of your physical possessions are gone, when you're fearful about the knock on the door? What is it that gets you through?

[20 : 33] It's the fact that the most sure thing about your life is that it's going to end with you in the presence of Jesus. I love the way Dutch Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom puts it.

She says, never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God. The Bible presents Abraham as the father of faith.

And so that is why Jesus says, verse 39, and I know it's slightly outsider verses this morning, but it's the run up to this section. The challenge to the Pharisees, the challenge to every generation who read that, is do what Abraham did.

Do the works that Abraham did. And so in the time we have remaining, I just want us to see that Jesus offers us in these verses two rock solid things to walk the life of faith with.

You want to think about this? This is like a cross country skier with two poles. And they come by way, if you look at the text of the two truly, truly statements that Jesus makes and truly, truly just means, and my friend Wayne always says this, it crubbers, get a load of this.

[21 : 50] Get a load of this. In other words, you need to get this. This is really important, says Jesus to this generation. So here's the first pole. And these will be really quick. Verse 51. The first pole is that as we journey in this life of faith, we can say to ourselves and to one another that my life is untouchable.

And this is all to do with Jesus' ability. That he can say that whoever obeys my words will never see death. Now I've heard people make some big claims in life, but you have to say that that is the biggest claim that anyone has made.

That you will never die. What? How can he say that? Well, he can say it because this gospel will end with him tasting death. Bearing the guilt and punishment for sin that his people deserved, he once and for all took it and he rose on the third and our lives are caught up with the risen king.

The Pharisees don't understand that. They say, you claim that no one who trusts in you tastes death. Let me give you two examples of people who did. Abraham died. What's more, the prophets died.

How can you claim that? And you have to say on one hand they're buying on the money. Humanly speaking, they did die. But in another sense, they live because their lives are caught up with Christ on high.

[23 : 20] They're with him. Waiting for him to bring in the new creation. This is where we are journeying. Those who have died, who were people of faith, they're with the Lord.

With the Lord. You have to ask yourself if you're here and you don't believe in this Jesus. That is not where your life will end. Think about the future. But as I thought about this week, do you know what?

I just thought to myself, do you know what? The fact that Christ is the end sorted, that is the most liberating thing I could ever know in my life. And it should free me to take risks and live the life of faith for the glory of Jesus in the present.

Do you know, I remember having this distinct thought driving back from the hospital at Christmas time when my uncle died. Taking in the brevity of life, I'd never seen a dead body before and I walk in, bang, I'd just missed him by two minutes and there he is.

Driving home, thinking to myself, do you know what? If Christ has my present, if Christ has my future, then why not take risks speaking for him?

[24 : 36] What does it matter if my neighbours think I'm loopy? They do already. What does it matter if my friends think I'm bonkers? Who cares? They should free us from the paralysing fear of man that so often grips my tongue.

Knowing that my life in him is untouchable. And the second poll, really quickly, is that my God is incomparable, which is all to do with knowing Jesus' identity.

The Pharisees say, verse 48, that you are a Samaritan, you have a demon, which is both an insult and smokescreen, smokescreen, from having to wrestle with the big questions that Jesus is asking them to think about.

And let me just say, we live in a world that does exactly the same. That there's no end to the things in our world that it offers us to keep us from thinking about the biggest questions in life.

You know, I was reading a stat the other day that apparently Netflix's biggest competitor is human sleep. Feeding us entertainment, keeping us awake, giving us things.

[25 : 49] Jesus says, have a think about who I am, who he is. Well, Jesus says, verse 58, before Abraham was, I am. And don't skip that.

Jesus is unashamedly claiming the divine name of God, the one that God used when revealing himself to Moses, in Exodus chapter 3.

And Jesus is saying, I am. I am the self-existent one. I am the eternal one. I am the unrivaled one.

I am the timeless one. I am the everywhere present, all-knowing, all-seeing, unchanging one. And Jesus draws a straight line between God's declaration in Exodus 3 and what he is saying about himself.

And he is claiming nothing less than divinity. Let me just say, our Jehovah's Witnesses friends would consider Jesus, as I understand it, to be a created being.

[26 : 54] Our Mormon friends believe, as I understand it, that Jesus was the firstborn spirit child of the heavenly father and a heavenly mother, which is why a great question to ask when you're in conversation with somebody is, which Jesus are we talking about?

And they will say to us, but Jesus never claimed to be God. And we want to lovingly and respectfully say from this passage that the original hearers would not have picked up stones by which to kill him for blasphemy under the Old Testament law if they didn't know in this moment exactly what he was claiming.

Let me say, why does that matter? Let me just say, if he wasn't fully God, then he'd not be able to save us. He wouldn't be able to live a life unstained by sin, to live a life fully obedient to the father, no righteousness of his own to share with us.

It really matters that Jesus is claiming divinity here. Now, just imagine if you think about it, if you were to come before a king, you were to come up to the gates and you look down and this is kind of your nightmare, isn't it, that your shirt is ripped, your mud stains all over your trousers, your ties all over the place, your hair's mud, what would you need?

You would need two things. You would need to take your dirty clothes off, get rid of them and you would need somebody to come and give you perfectly white new ones.

[28 : 32] And when we think about what Jesus has done, we need to think about those two aspects of it. We are forgiven in him. As far as the east is from the west, that's how far he's removed our sin from us and in him we are clothed with his perfect righteousness and he has made us his.

Do you know there will never be a moment that Jesus isn't on our side. Not for a nanosecond will he cease from lovingly praying for us in heaven as those who have been lovingly brought into the very family of God.

Friends, my life is untouchable because of what he's done for me and my life is incompatible, my God is incomparable because of who he is for me.

And this is what Jesus offers us this morning. Do you need to hear it? Do you need to hear it? Let me just close. I'll tell you about a guy I played football with in Aberdeen.

His name was Dane. Dane was hard as nails. Loved playing with Dane because he did all the dirty work and I did all the running. But do you know what he did to fund himself through university?

[29 : 52] Being a fishing village boy, here's what he did. His little side hustle is that he was a lobster fisherman. Okay, get that, students. That's what he did to fund himself through university.

And he invited me out one day with him on his boat. And I say invited, it makes it sound like a glamorous thing. It was brutal. And we went out on this boat, we sailed out to his pots, the waters are going, and I watch him draw them up.

And I watch him take out the lobsters. And I watch as these things go swinging for him. Swinging for him. And what he does in that moment is that he takes an elastic band and he humanely and gently just places the elastic band over the pincer.

And he does exactly the same with the other pincer. and he just neutralizes the threat. And in that moment I'm looking at these creatures and they are still terrifying to me.

Still terrifying to me. They are enormous. Their beady eyes staring at me. Their thing's going. I pick them up. I feel the sharp edges.

[31 : 05] I feel the pain and on top of it all they smell awful. But the thing is because of what he had done they couldn't get me.

They couldn't get me. And in exactly the same way brothers and sisters because of what Jesus has done because of what he has done the Bible would say that in him we can face up to death knowing that he has taken out the one thing that can never get us.

In him we can face up to death and through the pain and even though the thought of it still looks and feels horrible nevertheless the Bible would say that we can say where oh death is your sting where oh grave is your victory for my life is caught up in the one who acted to defeat you and he loves me.

Oh my life is untouchable and my God is incomparable Jesus says to all those who would listen don't deny it don't defy it know and trust that I've come to deal with it.

Here is the promise verse 51 Jesus says very truly I tell you whoever obeys my word will never see death.

[32 : 38] Let's pray will we? And so in the silence now Father I ask that by your precious Holy Spirit that you would be ministering to us this morning some of us in that place of being really scared about what tomorrow holds as we think about ourselves as we think about those who are nearest and dearest to us as we think about friends and family for whom this is really raw Lord be at work this morning by your spirit bringing that fresh assurance of the fact that our lives are caught up in the one who lives and so Father we thank you that your love has been poured into our hearts through the

Holy Spirit that you have given us Father thank you for this wonderful picture of Jesus that we've seen in John chapter 8 thank you for the Bible in our own language that we can read and understand and know that he is the light of the world that he is the one who has come to liberate us from our sin and he is the one who has come to lead us through death so Father be at work this morning as we finish our time together Lord be at work in our conversations Lord help us to be those who pray and stand and journey with one another Father above all keep our eyes fixed on Christ and it's in his name that we pray Amen