

# **“Nothing to be frightened of”**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 21-23, 51-58**

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

## **INTRODUCTION**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 15.
- Steve Jobs was one of the pioneers of the personal computer and a co-founder of Apple. Before his death in 2011, Jobs struggled with the common belief that there is nothing after death – that idea that death is like an “off switch” on a computer so that, in Jobs’ words, it’s just “Click! And you’re gone.”<sup>1</sup>
  - Listen to what he wrote in his biography: **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** “*it’s strange to think that you accumulate all this experience . . . and it just goes away. So I really want to believe that something survives, that maybe your consciousness endures.*”<sup>2</sup>
    - We can relate to this. On the one hand, we believe our lives matter. We believe that the things we do make a real difference and are worth doing. Yet, this does not seem to fit with the idea that death just ends everything.
- Harvard professor James Wood wrote an article about this. He talks about the fact that as you get older, the deaths of your parents and friends, make it harder to ignore the reality of your own death. As he looks back at all the hours he put into his projects and accomplishments, Woods says, they all seem rather short-lived and pointless.
  - He argues that if the entire universe is eventually just going to die then everything that has ever been done will be forgotten. It will be like it never existed at all. Within this big picture, Woods says that our lives and all our accomplishments, along with everything humanity has achieved, is “cosmically irrelevant.”<sup>3</sup>
    - That is terribly frightening. Yet, just like Jobs, we want to say, “**No, it can’t end that way! There must be more.**” It is right here that the message of Easter is so profound and life changing.
- This morning I want to show you how the message of Jesus’ resurrection not only affirms that your life has meaning and that you can outlast death but the message of Jesus’ resurrection also says that everything you do matters and that everything you do can outlast death.
  - In order that we may gain this confidence, I want to look at what the apostle Paul says about death in 1 Corinthians 15. Let’s do this in two parts.
    - In part one, let’s talk about why death *is* something to be frightened of. But then in part two, let’s look at how Jesus resurrection changes everything so that death *is nothing* to be frightened of.

## **SOMETHING TO BE FRIGHTENED OF**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** First then let’s look at why death *is* something to be frightened of.
  - To see this I want to contrast how Paul faces the reality of death with how we as a culture face the reality of death.
- In this chapter Paul does something that seems crazy. He taunts death. He looks death in the eye and he mocks it. Look at verse 55. **READ 55** – *O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?* Let me give you a modern paraphrase: “**Hey death! Na-na-na-boo-boo!**” He’s heckling death. He ridicules it like a victorious warrior does when he disarms his enemy, throws him to the ground, and puts his boot on his enemy’s throat.
  - So here is the big question: where does Paul get such supreme confidence in the face of our greatest enemy? Is he naïve? Is he just talking big?

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2011), 571.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> James Wood, “Is That All There Is?” *Secularism and Its Discontents*, *New Yorker*, August 14, 2011.



- Others try to be heroic when facing death. Like Dylan Thomas who wrote, **“Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”**
  - That is very heroic sounding but it is about as useful as telling an ant to scream with all its might in the face of the bulldozer that is bearing down on it. This is all so different from Paul’s supreme confidence that death cannot hurt him.
- Yet others will say that death is just a natural part of life.
  - This sounds nice but death is not natural. Have you ever seen a dead body? I remember the first time I saw one. Everything in me felt how unnatural it was. I wanted to scream, **“Move! Do something!”** But the person was gone and the body was a hollow shell.
- Barnes goes through this list to show that none of these ways are much help in dealing with the reality of death. He then goes on to show that, if death is extinction, then it is very hard to see why we should work so hard to make a difference in this world.
  - We may work hard and achieve great things. When we die some people will remember us for a while and praise some things we did. But it will not be too long before a day comes when there is only one person left in the world that remembers us and visits our grave. Soon that person also will die. Then everything about who we are and what we have done will be forgotten forever.
    - And then to try and inject some humour into an otherwise depressing topic, Barnes notes that there will be one more person to visit your grave - **“the man driving the earth-digger who scoops out your remnants when the graveyard is sold off for suburban housing.”**<sup>5</sup>
- Barnes is trying to get us to face up to the facts - to stop candy coating death. Death *is* something be frightened of because it will take everything from us.
  - This is why the poet Edgar Allen Poe wrote a famous poem called “The Raven.” In the poem a sinister raven sits perched on the window ledge saying one word over and over again. The raven says, “Nevermore.”
    - When we want to talk again with a loved one who has passed away, the raven says, “nevermore.” When we get old and want our youthful bodies back, the raven says, “nevermore.”
- In a sense this is all rather depressing. But that is precisely what Barnes is trying to get us to see. If there is no God and death is extinction, then there simply is no way to candy coat it. Death *is* something to be frightened of because everything great about human existence will one day vanish, not just for a few centuries, or millennia, but forever. It will be like we never existed at all.
  - Death spreads its black wings over everything and says, “Nevermore.”

## NOTHING TO BE FRIGHTENED OF

- We are now ready to for the second part. We will now see that, in light of the Easter, **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** why death is *not* something to be frightened of.
  - How does Paul get such confidence in the face of death – a confidence that fills him with untiring motivation to make a difference with his life?
- Notice that throughout the chapter Paul has been retelling the big story of the Bible. The story of the Bible begins with the fact that God exists, that God is good, and that he created everything that exists including you and I. You feel in the deepest part of your being that human life matters and the Bible says, **“You are right to feel this way because you are the special creation of God.”** The Bible also says your desire to make a difference in this world is right for God made human beings to do things.
  - But Adam, the head of the human race, and his wife Eve chose to rebel against their Creator. The Bible calls this “sin.” The punishment for sin is death. Look back at verse 21 and 22. **READ 21a** - Paul says, **“By a man came death”** and in verse 22 he says, **“As in Adam all die.”**
- But the good news of the Bible is that God, out of love for us, put a plan in motion to rescue us from death and to bring us into a renewed world that is marked by life. This plan culminates in Jesus Christ and what he did.

<sup>5</sup> Barnes, *Nothing to be frightened of*, Location 3673, Kindle.

- Look back at verse 3. **READ 3** - *“Christ died for our sins.”* On the cross, Jesus the sinless one took our sins upon himself. He voluntarily took the punishment that we deserve. And so he died and was buried.
  - But death could not hold him. As verse 4 says, God raised him from the dead on the third day.
- This is all part of God’s big story to renew his world. Jesus’ resurrection was not just some amazing event for the Guinness Book of World Records. No, Jesus’ resurrection was the beginning of God’s new world. It is a foretaste of what is to come. Now we are ready to see why all this matters to our lives.
  - Look at verse 20. Paul calls Jesus’ resurrection the *“first fruits.”* What does that mean? Well I remember a few years ago being up in Vernon at the beginning of July. There was a sign on the side of the road that said, *“Now available: first cherries of the season.”*
    - That sign means at least three things: First, it means right here and now you can taste these delicious cherries. Second, this is only a small sampling. You can’t buy ten flats of cherries yet. But third, the first fruits are the evidence that a great harvest is right around the corner when millions - of cherries will be available.
- So let’s put everything together now. In this chapter Paul is saying that even though Adam brought death into the world through his sin, God has sent Jesus to bring life. Jesus does this by dying for our sins and then rising from the dead.
  - But here is the big point: his resurrection is the first fruits. It is a sampling. It is the evidence that a great harvest is right around the corner. A day is coming when God will raise all of Jesus’ people from the dead. He will give them bodies that are immortal and imperishable bodies. And he will bring his resurrection people into his renewed world.
    - The logic is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** Since God raised Jesus from the dead, he can and will raise all “those who belong to Christ” from the dead.
- So you see, Paul is not just trying to talk big or stay positive. His confidence comes from rock solid evidence. Sin has been dealt with. Death has been beaten.
  - God has already demonstrated that he can raise the dead and so it is logical to believe he can do it again.
    - When you possess this hope then, like Paul, you can look death straight in the eye and ridicule it as a defeated enemy.

### THREE AREAS OF SUPREME CONFIDENCE

- With all that said, let me get really practical and show you three parts of your life where this can fill you with supreme confidence. **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** First, since God will resurrect Jesus’ people (like he resurrected Jesus), you can experience supreme confidence in the face of your own death.
  - This makes me think of our own Gerry Anderson who passed away about ten months ago. It was three years before this that he and Esther found out that he had cancer and that it would be terminal. He told me that when he got that diagnosis he had a deep sense of peace and assurance.
    - Now you might think it is just denial or shock. But I had the privilege of visiting him many times right up until the very end and that assurance never faded. This was not some vague hope of an afterlife. Gerry’s assurance was based on the rock solid fact that God raised Jesus from the dead and that God promises to do the same with all those who belong to Christ. This is why Gerry gave me strict orders about his memorial saying, *“don’t you dare exalt me. You tell them what Jesus can do for a person.”*
- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** Second, since God will resurrect Jesus’ people (like he resurrected Jesus), you can experience great comfort as you mourn the deaths of Christians whom you love.
  - This is what sustained Don Tyler. Don Tyler is the pastor of one of our sister churches in Kamloops. Some years ago his wife Pam died of cancer. Don must have been around fifty. He was devastated but a short while later he stood up in front of about 200 people at our regional convention.

- He could not even speak. A minute went by. Not a word was said and the whole place was overcome with emotion. But then with a shaking voice he said four words – four words that defied and ridiculed death. He simply said, ***“The tomb is empty.”***
  - Don Tyler was saying, ***“Since God raised Jesus from the dead he will also raise all those who belong to Christ from the dead. Since my wife Pam belonged to Christ, he can and will raise her and I will see her again.”***
- **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** Third, since God will resurrect Jesus’ people (like he resurrected Jesus), you can experience untiring motivation to make a difference in this lifetime.
  - Look again at what Paul says in verse 58. **READ 58** - ***Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.***
    - Since God will raise the dead like he raised Jesus, what we do in for Christ in this life will last into God’s future. That is why our actions are not in vain. In some way they will last.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** N.T. Wright says, ***“You are – strange though it may seem...accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter one’s fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.”***<sup>6</sup>
  - Oh what meaning this gives to our lives! Your life matters. What you do matters. Your life is cosmically relevant. When you see this, it fills you with untiring motivation to keep working hard.

## CONCLUSION

- So let’s make sure we are crystal clear on this. How do you get this supreme confidence? Not by looking inward at yourself but by looking upward to Jesus.
  - In that Charlie Chaplin film he tries every strategy he can think of for escaping the ball and chain. Nothing works. He finally realizes that it is a problem that he cannot solve. He must look outside himself. And so the film ends with him turning his head upward. He looks to the sky in hope of seeing a plane or a boat far out on the water – someone who can rescue him.
    - This is the message of Easter. Death is powerful enemy. There is nothing you can do to defeat this enemy. Oh but lift your eyes to the one who can. Lift your eyes to Jesus. He has defeated sin. He has conquered death.
      - Do you belong to Jesus? To belong to him you simply have to bow the knee before him and say, ***“Jesus, save me. Save me from sin and death.”***
- A day is coming when God will raise all who belong to Jesus. He give his people new bodies that are immortal and imperishable and bring them into a glorious new world where death will be no more.
  - On that day the saying will come true, ***“death is swallowed up in victory.”*** And all Jesus’ people will join in ridiculing death. We will heckle it. We will mock it, saying, ***“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”***
    - Death: for the Christian, it’s nothing to be frightened of.

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208.