

“The Last Enemy” John 8:48-59 Steve Harden 3/8/20

“48 The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” 49 Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. 50 Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” 52 The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’ 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” 54 Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’ 55 But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” 57 So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” 58 Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” 59 So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”

This is the word of God. Throughout my ministry, I have had the opportunity, the privilege, to conduct many funerals, dozens I suppose. And while preparing for this message today, I reminisced about many of them. There were those who were dear, dear friends and I had the opportunity to speak the gospel at their passing. My mom and dad, I had the opportunity to speak and to preach and to remember them officially in that capacity. I had the opportunity to preach funerals who by all outward appearance did not know Jesus, and I can tell you there’s a difference for sure. But most of us don’t tend to think about death very often, I know I don’t. I have to force myself. I have to work at it, if you will. For a long time, it’s been my opinion that it is a very profitable thing to spend time thinking about my own death. That sounds morbid, but it really is not. A long time ago I wrote a list, I mean, well over twenty years, I wrote a list of resolutions for myself that I wanted to review regularly to think about what my life stood for and what impact I wanted to have and number eleven is: “I consider my death and the results of my living, often.” And so, hopefully at least once a month I have a chance to review that. It really kind of rings what Marcus Aurelius said, and he said it much more poetically. He said, “It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.” And I would echo that thought, that’s what I was trying to say.

But you know, none of us can escape death. Obviously, you’re probably following the corona virus and the death rate of that, and you know, probably because I was studying for this message today, but it crossed my mind that the death rate for all causes is pretty nigh on to 100%. We’re all going to die. No one gets out of this alive. Someday, I’m not going to be here and all that will be left of me are the memories of those I’ve loved and hopefully a substantial life insurance policy. So, for a time, this morning, I want to consider what Jesus said about death in verse 51, and we’re really going to focus on this one verse today. In John 8:51 he says, “Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” This is a pretty phenomenal statement. Now, He is not offering Ponce de Leon’s fountain of youth, obviously, right, where you never leave this earth, that would not be a mercy. But He is offering us something much, much better. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 that the last enemy that will be destroyed is death, and so this morning I want to contemplate for a moment this last enemy, and I want to frame our thoughts around this verse in three ways. First of all, the pledge, the

stipulation, and the guarantee. And lest you be concerned, we'll spend most of our time on the pledge, so if we get halfway through our time and that's as far as we've made it, that's okay, we're still on target.

Jesus makes an incredible pledge in this text. He pledges that to those of us who keep His word, we will never see death. He promises to remove any reason whatsoever to fear our own death. That is quite a promise. A promise, I will say, that is really relevant to everything we see in our media every single day, right now. There is a lot of fear and anxiety and it's just phenomenal to see just how taken up we are with fear. Now, we've been walking through John 8 for a long time and we know that Jesus is facing fierce opposition from the Jewish leaders. We know that. It's pretty intense. I think it was last week that we talked about how He said, 'You are of your father, the devil,' and 'You are a pack of liars.' Well, that's pretty intense. And they responded back to Him, 'Well you're just a Samaritan.' Well that was a real slam in that day. They were calling him a cross-breed, the Samaritans had intermarried with Gentiles 600 years earlier, and they were still holding it against them. It was a racial slur, but also in the passage it was an innuendo that no one but His mama knew who His daddy was. Remember, He was born, do the math and so there's a real slam here against Jesus. They were going at it pretty intensely.

And Jesus says, 'You guys really don't want to do this.' Look at verses 49 and 50, "Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge." So, what is he saying? He's saying, I'm not going to defend myself to you. I don't have to defend myself to you. But you need to know that there is one who will defend me, and that's my Father. He is the one who seeks my glory; He is the one who seeks to further my reputation and if you dishonor me, believe me, you are setting yourself against God and in that day you are going to answer to Him and it's not going to be the way you want it to be. Reject me, He says, at your own risk. There is coming a day when you are going to stand face to face with God and you are going to answer to what you do with my words, you see? He says, it's going to get real for you, in that day. And then, He immediately follows up that statement with the verse we're talking about today, verse 51. "He who keeps my word will never see death." If you reject my word, there's coming a day when God, Himself, will judge you. But if you keep my word, you will never see death. That's the contrast He's stating.

Now, how can He say that if you keep His words, you won't see death? Because we see death all around us! We already alluded to the fact that we're all going to die one day. What does He mean? That is the importance of today. When you're born again, when you're born from above, when you're redeemed, when God has changed your heart, you are given a type of life that will never ever end because you are made alive spiritually. Ephesians 2:1-5: "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." Okay, you were dead. You were dead to all things spiritual. Now, he says in verses 4 and 5: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved." So, we were once spiritually dead, now we are spiritually alive. There is a change there. There's a change of heart.

When you are redeemed, or born again, God grants you the Holy Spirit and He brings you life. There is something that happens within you. He awakens you to spiritual things. Things

which you were dead to before, now you're alive to. You're no longer blind to the truth that Jesus speaks. You are alive to things of God. This new spiritual life gives us the ability to fellowship with God, to feel His presence, to experience Him, to hear His words and sense that He loves me. That's what He has given to you. He has given you life. Our physical death is not the end for us, and I think this is what is at the heart of what He's teaching us here in verse 51.

Our consciousness continues without interruption. Now, when I use consciousness, I'm trying to think about that part of you, the Bible calls it your spirit, your consciousness, who you are that makes you who you are, that internal thing. We are not just pieces of organic matter walking around. There is something within us that makes us who we are and our consciousness, our spirit, continues without interruption forever and ever. I propose to you that death is separation. Death is separation. Physical death is the separation of man's spirit, man's consciousness, from his physical body. And that's weird to us because everyone we know, there's one body and one spirit, they're kind of a match, they go together, right? We are one and one. That's why the Trinity so messes with us, because there's one consciousness, one mind, in three persons and it blows our mind, we can't understand it, right? So, in our experience there's one spirit, one body. In physical death, those two become separated, do you see? So, physical death is separation. In life, consciousness is linked to body, in death, consciousness is uncoupled with the body.

Now, when we talk about spiritual death, it is also separation, but it's man's spirit, who he is, separated from God. That's spiritual death. The two become separate. All good things are brought to us from God and that is immensely terrifying. That is terrifying. To one who dies without Jesus, this means final, irreversible, eternal separation from everything that God brings, everything that He is, all beauty, all love, everything that is good and noble and right, everything that is pure. For one who is without Christ, your spirit is separated from all things good. The fate of a man without faith in Jesus is too overwhelming to really spend much time on. It is terrifying. Death, itself, came into being and is the direct and inevitable consequence of our sin. God said, in the garden of Eden, that death would be the penalty of sin if Adam and Eve disobeyed Him. When they disobeyed, death came into being as a consequence of sin. God said, don't eat or you'll die. He ate and death came into that existence. Death is a consequence of sin.

Now, Jesus says that if you keep my word you will be rescued from the consequence of the sin that occurred back in the garden of Eden. You will be rescued from the consequence of sin, which is death. You are never going to have to pay that consequence because Jesus paid it for you. We will never experience spiritual separation from God because Jesus paid the penalty, or the consequence, of that sin. Think back, on the cross, do you remember Jesus said, "My Father, why have you forsaken me?" On the cross, Jesus was separated for the very first time. He experienced that death, that penalty, that consequence of sin, and it overwhelmed Him. It was too much for Him. Jesus was forsaken by God and experienced that death, in our place, as our substitute, so that you and I won't have to! That is why Jesus can say in the great commission, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." I am with you always. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing can separate us because of what Jesus did on the cross of Calvary. That is why Paul can write in 1 Corinthians 15 "Oh death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?" Jesus took it out! Took it away.

Do you see now how this can truly transform our view of death? How it can transform and make it different from everyone without Jesus? You will never die spiritually, at all. Your consciousness will never pass away. That which makes you, you, remains forever. It's never going to slip away. Paul writes that "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord"

right? What does that mean? If you're not in the body, you're present with the Lord. You know, some will teach some end of life things about purgatory, some people talk about soul sleep about how the body goes down into the ground and goes to sleep until the second coming of Christ? I don't buy it. It doesn't fit. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Your consciousness never goes away, it never dies. That which makes you, you, will never pass away forever and ever and ever and ever and ever. The moment we physically die on this earth, when our body dies, that moment is the moment we enter the presence of God and that's a blink of an eye. As long as it takes to blink an eye, you're there. If we can grasp and accept this truth, this one truth, fear is gone. I love what R.C. Sproul said, he said, "I don't fear death at all, it's the dying that's got me worried." And okay, I'm with him there, right? You don't have to fear death. You don't have to fear death. There's no more terror.

You see, the promise that the moment my eyes shut on this side they open on the other side means everything to me. Right now, why I said death is a mercy earlier, right now, I experience God's presence in such a limited way. Doesn't your heart yearn for more? I just always yearn for more and when I get more then I yearn for that much more and so it is a life of yearning to be in the presence of Jesus. It's a life of longing and in that day I get to see Him face to face like you and I are looking at one another. I get to see my Savior, the one who gave it all for me. I get to see Him and I get to be in His presence. When we understand that death ushers us into that experience, we see that death is a gift, not a punishment. For the believer, death is a gift, not a punishment! It is grace! We are not always going to have to battle this body of sin. I'm not always going to have to deal with pain and guilt and shame and weakness. All of that is going to be rolled off, and I look forward to that day. I long for that day! Death is a grace. To be in the immediate presence of God, that experience won't always be withheld from me. And when we see Him face to face, it's going to be worth whatever I slogged through on this earth, and some of you are slogging through a lot, and some of the ones that I love dearly, are slogging through a lot. But you know, in that day it will be like, what does Paul say, momentary light affliction, regardless of how much you suffer on this side.

Around 125 A.D. there was a Greek by the name of Aristides and he wrote to one of his friends trying to explain the extraordinary success of this new religion called Christianity, and in this letter he writes this, he says, "If any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world they rejoice and they offer thanks to God and they accompany his body with songs and thanksgiving as if he were passing from one place to another nearby." See, it blew his mind, right? But I'd say the early Christians got it. They knew. They understood. Dying is like going from one room to another in your house. Think about how often we do that. You're in one room and you get hungry and you go to the kitchen, right? If the room you're in is this life and your kitchen is the next life, the time that you pass under the threshold between rooms, that's death. It's just a passing through. Jesus' pledge is that if you keep His words, you will never see death. You will never be separate from God, even in that moment of your dying. That's our pledge.

Now, let's look at the stipulation. He says the stipulation of that pledge is "he who keeps my word." That's the qualifier here, right? "He who keeps my word will never see death." So, I would say it's pretty important for us to understand what He says when He says, "He who keeps my word." That's our longing, that's what we want, so we need to see. To keep Jesus' words means that you hear and appropriate the word of God into your being, that it gets below the surface if you will, gets below the skin. John 8:47, a few verses earlier, says, "Whoever is of God hears the word of God, the reason why you do not hear them is you are not of God." When you're talking to someone, do you ever say, 'do you hear me?' What are you saying? It's not,

can your ears physically take up the sound that my voice is putting out, unless you're married and... but we won't go there, right? 'Do you hear me?' It means, do you understand what I'm saying? Do you comprehend? Some of you, that's real, okay. Do you comprehend, do you understand, have you appropriated what I'm telling you? That's what it means to keep His word. You take it in. The word finds its home in you. John 15, "He who abides in my word," who makes his home in God's word. For you to keep God's word, the truth of the gospel must soak into your life. A knowledge of the truth of the gospel without any subsequent change of heart is without value. We all would affirm that there is a heart change, a passing from death to life that is conversion, that matters in being a believer. New life comes with a changed heart. It's hard to explain, right? It's even harder to explain when you're a parent and you're trying to explain it to your child. 'Do you hear me?' It's hard to teach that to your child and it's really hard to understand when that transformation has happened with your child. Every parent longs for that to happen, but it's hard to know, and we just keep praying, right?

A friend of mine, Bill Shannon, used to be a children's minister, he's still a pastor now, doing some other things, but he wrote something, he taught in our church about parents and children and the gospel and he also wrote this and so, I thought it was worth sharing with you. "Remember that the primary factor in any person's coming to Christ is not how much doctrine he or she knows. The real issue is the extent of God's work in the heart. Even the most mature believer does not comprehend all of God's truth. We can only begin to fathom the riches of God's word in this present life. Full understanding of every aspect of the gospel certainly is not required for salvation. After all, the thief on the cross next to Jesus knew only that he, himself, was guilty and Jesus, who was the true Lord and Messiah, had done nothing wrong. How did he know this much? As Jesus said to Peter, 'Flesh and blood did not reveal this, but my Father who is in heaven.' The thief's appeal was simple, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Despite the meager amount of doctrine that he knew, Jesus assured him. 'Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" So, you hear what he's saying, it's not the amount of doctrine you know. It's not the amount of doctrine your child knows. What it's about is a changed heart. Even the thief on the cross didn't know a whole lot, but it was enough for Jesus to save him.

I read about a missionary by the name of Dennis Cochran who was a missionary to the Duna Indian tribe in New Guinea and he was trying to express the idea of faith to try to put it in this language and the word that was closest that he had to faith was just knowledge, right? Knowledge that didn't necessarily lead to anything further, and he knew that was not the word for faith that he wanted to translate into the Scripture. Faith is believing God, but it also includes responding in some manner. And so, he was stuck. He was also translating folk tales of the Duna tribe and he came upon this story and it made sense to him, and it had the words he needed to explain faith. And the story was about a squirrel who tormented this dog, and y'all have that picture right? You know how they can do that. He was chased by this dog up a tree and he sat up there on a branch and he just laughed at the dog because he knew the dog couldn't climb a tree. And the dog kept threatening him saying: 'I'm going to get you, I'm going to get you,' and the squirrel was so unconcerned because he knew that the dog couldn't climb the tree. The words that they used for the squirrel was that the dog's words came in one ear and out the other. Have you heard that expression? His words just came in one ear and out the other. After several more threats, then the dog said, 'Well I'm still going to get you because I'm going to go get my friend who can climb trees.' And at that moment, it went from the words coming in one ear and out the other and in that language it says, the word went into his ears. And so, when the dog ran away,

the squirrel climbed down and escaped. The difference between the words coming in one ear and out the other and it sinking down into your ears is what it means to keep His word. Even the demons of hell know more theology than we do, but it doesn't save them. It goes in one ear and out the other. To keep His word means that the word goes down into your ears. You abide in it.

The pledge, the stipulation, but also, the guarantee. I want to point out to you in verse 51 the first two words, "Truly, truly, I say to you." These words, 'truly, truly,' are used throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament. You know the words as 'Amen.' Amen, Amen. Which sounds kind of strange to us at the beginning, because we say it at the end of our prayers, but let's explore a little bit. This is a great guarantee for us that what Jesus says is true. Amen is a word that is used almost universally in every language. It comes from the Hebrew verb that means 'to support with the arm, or to carry' like you would carry a child on your arm. It came to mean firm and unshakeable, safe, secure. There are two predominant uses of the word in the Hebrew in the Old Testament, the first is used of God as one of His attributes. He is the Amen. It means unshakeable; God will not be moved. He is strong. He is the Amen. He is faithful and true. He is never changing. He is the God of truth, can never change His mind, can never lie. He is unshakeable, the Amen.

But it was also used when men and women desired to express an agreement or acceptance of what God is saying is true. They respond to God being the Amen as amen, that's true. Now, do you remember right after the Israelites got into the promised land and they stood on Mount Gerazim and Mount Ebal and they read the law back and forth, they read the law to them, and they responded, the text says, 'Amen,' which meant, we accept the law. We agree to be bound by it. We want the law. It was their way of expressing agreement. When we say amen at the end of our prayer, may what God has promised to be true, be true, we accept and affirm, amen. Now the New Testament uses it the same way, but it goes a little further. In Jesus' words in the gospel of John, we see it used, but also in the New Testament we see the word 127 times. 76 of those are at the beginning of a sentence like here in John 8, and 48 times at the end of the sentence. When it is used at the beginning of a sentence, God is speaking. In the Old Testament, you read, "Thus saith the Lord," you know, those terms that mean, 'Okay, take notice. I'm going to say something important here.' It's an official spoken word here, alright? When you see that in the New Testament it carries the same meaning. Okay, this is set apart, this is strong, this is an official pronouncement. So, when it's used at the beginning of the sentence it's God speaking and when it's used at the end of the sentence it's man speaking his affirmation and agreement.

So, when Jesus proceeds His comments, "He who keeps my word will not see death," when he proceeds those comments with "Truly, truly," or if you're an Old King James fan, 'Verily, verily I say unto you,' right? Amen and amen, I say unto you. He is saying, these words are true. These carry the same weight that you're used to in the Old Testament scriptures saying, 'Thus saith the Lord.' You can count on this because God is the Amen, because, Jesus says, I am the Amen, you can know that this is true. I solemnly affirm. And when used at the end of the sentences, we express our faith and affirmation. Listen to me, Jesus said, I who am faithful and true, I who am the Amen, I who am totally reliable to do what I promise to do, I say with all the reliability of my Father, Himself: if you keep my word, you will never see death. Jesus puts His reputation on the line by saying, 'Truly, truly,' Amen and Amen. And I would ask you, what greater verification do you need? Jesus, Himself, said, 'Amen and amen, this is true.'

There is a man, a pastor, by the name of Charles Simeon, who many years ago was a pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge and had a great story of perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds and a great story about how God brought him through that, but on his

deathbed in 1836, all of a sudden he smiled brightly and he asked the people who had been gathered in his room, "What do you think especially gives me comfort in this time?" Nobody answered, right? What do you answer that? And this is what he said: "The creation itself. I ask myself, did Jehovah create the world, or did I? Well he did. Now, if he made the world and all the rolling spheres of the universe, he certainly can take care of me. Into Jesus' hands I can safely commit my spirit." The Amen can take care of our spirits, because He is faithful and true. He understood, in that moment, that God is the Amen, the sure, unshakeable, all-powerful God of the universe, and it's into His hands I commit my spirit. I don't think that there is a greater truth known to man than the fact that Jesus died for sinners just like me. I know I am a sinner. I know I was dead in my sins, but He's changed me. I am now alive to spiritual things that I wasn't before. And this God who saved me, tells me I will never see death. There will never be a time that I lose consciousness, never be a time that my spirit dies. I will one day pass from one room into the next, but He tells me that I will never have to be afraid. To be absent from the body and into the unrestricted presence of my Savior, that's everything. And it's guaranteed by the creator of the universe, the Amen.

I just have to ask, what about you? Can you sing with joy in your heart about what is going to happen in the future? Can you sing and rejoice that one day you will be in His presence? Have His words gotten into you? Have they gone into your ears and settled? How I pray that they have, but if you're here this morning and they haven't, oh my goodness, trust Him. Believe His word. Know that His death alone can save you. I don't care how much theology you... I do care how much theology you know; I can't say that. Your theology is not going to limit you to come to Jesus, okay? Give all that you are to all that you know of Him and He will save you. Let's pray.

Oh, our Father, what a stupendous truth that we are allowed to just kind of pick up the curtain a little bit, to see the other side when one day we will be face to face with You. Father, you know our fears, you know sometimes how irrational they are in light of this truth, so would your Spirit move mightily within us to create within us a peace and a contentment about our own existence? May we know that, somehow communicate to our spirit, that we will never, ever die. I pray in the name of Jesus, amen.

As we do every week, we now come to the time of celebrating the Lord's table. Jesus died and He experienced that separation from God that we talked about so that we don't have to. We celebrate this new covenant by drinking and eating the elements. We celebrate that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. We celebrate the fact that when Jesus said, "Lo, I will be with you always," that meant us. Where is death's sting? In light of what we celebrate today, there is no sting. And how we long for and anticipate our being in the presence of Jesus because of what Jesus did on the cross that day. We celebrate hope as we celebrate the Lord's table. It is said that on the night He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took the bread and He gave thanks and He broke it and He said, "This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me." And in the same way He took the cup and He said, "This is the new covenant in my blood, do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me." He said that 'I am the bread of life, he who eats this bread will live forever.' And He said that as we celebrate this that we are to celebrate His table, remembering His coming again when He'll take us home to be with Him. If you are a believer, a follower of Jesus Christ, if His words have found a place in your ears, you are welcome to the table.