

I. Introduction:

A. About fifteen years ago, while I was in Cambridge, England on a study leave, I put the books down and went out for a run through the open fields along the Granta River. It was a spectacular day and other than a few cows, several young moms out with their children, and some members of the University's Medieval Club – who were recreating a 12th century jousting battle – I was alone.

B. I have been running four or five days a week for forty years. If I did my math right, that's over 8,000 runs. I remember almost none of them. But I remember this one. It was amazing.

C. Two miles after leaving Cambridge, the path led into Grantchester, a delightful village that boasts more Nobel laureates per capita than any other city in the world. But what made it so memorable was Saint Andrew & Saint Mary, an Anglican Church started back in the 14th century. **PICTURE**

D. The building itself has a certain stature and majesty about her, but it was two other things that have stayed with me. The first is the list of signatures of the pastors who have served there over the last five hundred years. It is featured along the back wall. The second is the cemetery that surrounds the church. On that day I spent an hour looking at the tombstones – and I did not find a single person buried there who had lived to be as old as I was at the time.

E. That made quite an impression. It reminded me that one day soon I would face my own death and be buried.

II. Our culture does its best to avoid discussions about death.

A. I know people who have never attended a funeral and who will not allow you to talk about death in their presence. In *Bonus Time* – Alec Hill's book – he mentions that Walt Disney was like that. He did not even attend the funeral of his brother.

B. And if you listen, you'll realize that some people will not say the word death, they will only ever use euphemisms to talk about it – noting that someone has “passed,” or “gone home;”

C. And though we are getting better – I think the hospice movement has been a good thing – we have largely professionalized dying, so much so that some people have never been around another person as they died. In spite of all we may do to avoid the topic, the actuarial tables are pretty clear: our life will end.

III. Our culture does its best to avoid death. but the Bible does not.

A. You already heard the account about Lazarus from John 11. Where Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick, but delays his trip to Judea for a couple days in order to ensure that Lazarus dies so he can focus on it.

1. The big point here is that he wants to demonstrate his power over death. When you look at what he does during this period, you see that he rather systematically demonstrates his power over: sin, evil, sickness, nature – and here, over death. This is one of Jesus' most significant miracles because, although he raises others from the dead, Lazarus had been dead for four days.

2. I suspect He also delays until Lazarus's death so we can also see how much he dislikes it. He is against death and the pain it causes. He weeps. There is something ugly and wrong and tragic about death.

B. There is another passage I want to highlight. It's Ecclesiastes 7:2-4. I realize that some of you really do not want to hear about death. "My life is hard enough already. I came today hoping for some encouragement. Is that too much to ask? And you are talking about death? Yes, and I will concede that there is some pain in this sermon. But there is a lot of encouragement here and in this series. And looking at death is a good thing. In Ecclesiastes 7, we read:

1. Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all, everyone dies, so the living should take this to heart.

2. ³Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. ⁴A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time.

C. I wish the campuses of Christ Church all had cemeteries around them. That way, every week we'd all need to walk past the graves of those who had gone before us – including our loved ones. I suspect that would help frame a healthier perspective about who we are and what really matters.

D. Over the next few weeks we are going to be exploring eternity, all as part of the Planted series.

1. I was not able to set this up perfectly. So, before we get done with this mini-series, we will break around the launch the Vernon Hills campus to think about what we are called to do. And we will be holding a special service at the Genesee Theater. And we will also have Palm Sunday and Easter. So, although this focus on eternity – which will include topics like: death, the intermediate state, judgment, the resurrection, Heaven and Hell, glorification – as while this series on eternity will not take an eternity. It may feel like it.

E. Today I want to make four observations about death.

IV. **Point One: Death is certain**

A. If you are familiar with 2 Kings, you might know that Elijah skipped death.¹ You may also know that those alive at the time he of Christ's return will be spared death as well. We can and should pray for that. I do. But the more consistent message of Scripture is that we – let me be a bit clearer – YOU will die.

B. Death is introduced in Genesis 2. God speaks about it there as what will happen if they sin. And then it comes up again in Genesis 3 as a result of sin. The Hebrew term - *moot* – is a dark word and it gets doubled, which is the way the Hebrew language stresses something. Some of our translations say, "you will surely die," or "dying you will die."

1. It's an infinite absolute, which means there are exclamation points after it.

2. And it implies separation - the spiritual separation from God was immediate. We read about that in Genesis 3. Physical separation – the body from the soul doesn't happen immediately, but it happens.

C. My point is, our death is certain.

1. The genealogies have a cadence about them that stresses that generations rise and fall.

2. In Job 14 we are told to number our days.

3. And in Hebrews 9:27 we read that: **It is appointed for man to die once, and after that to face judgment.**

4. Death is certain.

V. Point Two: Death is an enemy

A. In Phil 1, the Apostles Paul writes that to live is Christ and to die is gain. He is anxious to get to heaven. And – at that moment – anxious to get out of a Roman Prison. But it was not death he was excited about. It is being with Christ.

B. Some people act as though death is no big deal – this is what Mufasa told Simba – we eat the antelope but when we die, we become fertilizer for the grass that the antelope eats. No big deal.

C. The Bible is not so nonchalant. The Bible suggests that death is bad. That we were not made to die. That there is something wrong even about the death of a 90-year-old who dies peacefully. The Bible suggests that death is ugly.

D. About six years ago, my father died. About nine months earlier, I got “the call,” that Sheri and I knew was coming. Because our parents lived in Atlanta and Little Rock, we reasoned, we were going to get a phone call, and among the things we’d hear was: “cancer, heart attack, stroke.” And one day I got the call.

1. And in spite of being prepared, I was pretty shaken, because my Dad said he had an advanced and aggressive leukemia and the doctor thought he had six weeks to live.

2. He had been feeling week. In fact, the last time I saw him he said, “60 may be the new 40, and 70 may be the new 50. But 80 is 80.” Well, he had cancer but didn’t know it. And so he was exhausted.

E. There are many things about the way he died that were a blessing.

1. I am the oldest of five children. We all raced in. They got there on Friday evening. I didn’t get there until after church on Sunday. We were all there for a Monday meeting with his doctor. And when that happened, the doctor revised his prognosis and said my Dad would likely live 6 months. And he did.

F. And he and I had a great talk. He said he loved me and was proud of me – things he had not ever said. As it turned out, we both had some things to clear up.

G. And he made it clear, he was ready to die. He said, “I never expected to live this long. I have had a good life. If I live, I am thrilled to get more time your Mom and your brothers and sisters. I enjoy my life. But if I die, well, that is better. I go to be with Jesus. There should be no tears for me. There is no bad ending for me.”

H. That was a real blessing to us. And it played out that way. But, when we went to see the doctor, my Dad said, “I am not scared of death. But I am not excited about dying.” And the doctor assured him that he would go peacefully – which he did.

I. But he withered away. He got smaller and weaker. Death is ugly.

J. Here is what I wrote in my blog that day:

1. When I woke up this morning, I saw that I had a phone message from my brother. He had called at 12:56 AM. I didn’t have to wonder why. Phones that ring in the middle of the night seldom bring good news.

2. I waited a couple hours before calling back, reasoning that if he'd been making calls at 1 AM, he probably wasn't up early. When I reached him, he confirmed what I already knew: sometime shortly after midnight my Father had "slipped away." The hospice staff said that when they checked on him around midnight he was resting comfortably. When they checked on him ten minutes later he was gone. They told my Mom they were not surprised. They had heard that one more child was due to show up. Earlier that day, Steve had arrived and been in to see him. Their guess was that my Dad held out until the last of the five kids had made their last visit. And then he gave up.

3. How do we respond to the death of a loved one who knows Christ – and is thus promised Eternal Life? Some say we rejoice. I protest. That's too simple of an answer. It's not complete.

4. Death is ugly. It reduced my Dad to a shell of who he'd been. The man lying in the hospital bed was not the giant I knew as a child; not the man who hit more homeruns for the company softball team (of which I was the five year old bat boy) than anyone else; not the guy who got up early, worked hard and helped put five kids through college and grad school. Cancer and chemo diminished him. Death destroys. My Mom told me that he fought hard to maintain his dignity throughout his fight with cancer. "When he lost that I think he just gave up."

5. Death is ugly. For those in Christ it has lost its sting, but it is still a sign of the curse. It has been defeated but not yet destroyed. We await that.

6. It's too simple to say that our response is "to rejoice." There is that side of it, and not simply because it brings an end to suffering, but because it allows us to leave the world of the dying and enter the land of the living. It allows us to fully enter into the presence of God.

7. How do we respond to the death of a loved one? I turn to Acts 8:2 for direction. It's an easy passage to overlook but it has much to offer. It comes immediately after the stoning of Stephen. As you may know, shortly after Pentecost the early church grew rapidly and enjoyed great favor with just about everyone.... but then the persecution began. There was a 300-year, Empire-wide effort to wipe out Christianity. The first victim (martyr) was Stephen. He was stoned.

8. As you may know, his death came after he gave an impassioned speech to an agitated mob. For a while it looked as if he had won most of them over. He might have made it out alive had he stopped with the history lesson. But he kept speaking, directing his comments to them. Let me quote from Acts 7:51 and following, which I am taking from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*: **"And you continue, so bullheaded! Calluses on your hearts, flaps on your ears! Deliberately ignoring the Holy Spirit, you're just like your ancestors. Was there ever a prophet who didn't get the same treatment? Your ancestors killed anyone who dared talk about the coming of the Just One. And you've kept up the family tradition—traitors and murderers, all of you. You had God's Law handed to you by angels — gift-wrapped! — and you squandered it!"**

9. **At that point they went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles and invective. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, hardly noticed—he only had eyes for God, whom he saw in all his glory with Jesus standing at his side. He said, “Oh! I see heaven wide open and the Son of Man standing at God’s side!”**

10. **Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks.**

11. **Stephen died under a shower of rocks. It was quite a way to go out: he offered powerful testimony to the work of Christ; he stood fearless in the face of an angry crowd; he saw Jesus (who was normally seated at the right hand of the Father) stand to welcome him into heaven; and then he died.**

12. How did his friends respond to Stephen’s death? Acts 8:2 gives us the answer. There we read:

13. **Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.**

14. The translation I first memorized said, “Righteous men buried Stephen and wept.”

15. Did they cry for Stephen? Hardly. The King of the Universe had stood to welcome him into Heaven. They were believers. They knew it was all good for Stephen! They wept for themselves. His gain was their loss.

16. My Dad was not Stephen, and he would be the first to say so. But he was justified by the death of the King of the Universe, and so he has been welcomed into Heaven. There is no need to cry for him. But his gain is our loss. I’m glad his suffering is over, and thankful that he lived until I was in my 50s (few have that privilege). But it’s OK to weep.

K. Men and women, death is not Plan A. It is unnatural. It is not what we were designed for and it causes a lot of pain. It is a result of the fall. Pt One: Death is certain; Point two: Death is ugly

VI. **Point Three: 21st century Americans do a uniquely bad job of facing death.**

A. Western culture generally, and American culture in particular, has a difficult time with death and the dying.

1. I’ve already noted that we avoid thinking about it. The fact is: 1) we are generally not very good interacting with those who are terminally ill; and 2) many who are terminally ill often avoid the certainty of their own death until it is too late.

2. This has become one of my bigger frustrations. It used to be that at some point, those dying of cancer would resign themselves to death and we could talk about it. I could encourage them to make peace with God and others. To set their affairs in order. To bless their families. That does not happen much anymore. Even those who have lived long lives - and who have advanced diseases - often would rather hold out for a new trial than face death. And any suggestion by me that we talk about it is dismissed as a lack of faith that God will heal.

3. And this is not just true of those who do not believe in life after death. It is also true of those who say they do.

B. Some time ago, I read a spoof by Phil Yancey article about a society named Acirema in which no one believed in life after death. In the article he reports that anthropologists and sociologists had studied this group because they were so unique and they had made a number of observations about it. Four stood out. Because Aciremans believe that this life is all that matters:

1. They value youth. They do all they can to look younger, investing a lot of time and money into cosmetics and cosmetic surgery.
2. Death is denied or hidden. It is not talked about, and when it cannot be avoided, terms like “passing” or “going to sleep” are used.
3. Religion is positioned as something that helps you here and now. Since there is no belief in eternal life, the benefits of faith all need to unfold in this life.
4. People with disabilities struggle to excel, because a well-formed body demonstrates achievement, while nebulous inner qualities such as compassion and self-sacrifice merit little praise.

C. Yancey ends the spoof saying, “Just thinking about this society gives me the creeps. I sure am glad that I live in the good ol’ USA, where, as Gallup assures us, a full 90 percent of the population believe in an afterlife.”

D. It takes a while, but eventually you realize that that Acirema is simply America spelled backwards.

E. Point number one: death is certain; two – it is ugly; three - Americans do a uniquely bad job thinking about death and dying.

VII. Point Four: Christ defeated death.

A. As Christians, we must learn to face death in light of Christ’s victory over it and His promises about what happens next. In Christ death has been defeated. It has lost its sting. It has not yet been destroyed. But it will be.

B. The key chapter here is I Corinthians 15, which is mostly about the resurrection – which is proof that Jesus is who He claimed to be. But there is a bit more there.

1. In I Cor. 15 we are also told that Jesus is the first born from the dead – that is, he is a model for what will happen to us. That just as he got a new body we will as well. In fact, he will restore all things. That Jesus is going to restore and reclaim all that is His. That he will defeat all of his enemies.

2. And we are told that in the end, Jesus will not destroy death. It says that when he returns, Jesus will overtake all of his enemies, and then in verse 26 it says: **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.**

C. When we look ahead to new life, eternal life, the new heavens and new earth, there is no death.

1. I realize some of you get sideway over the idea of eternity. Hang in there. Don’t try to imagine time as you know it going forward forever. God – and eternity – are above time. There is some mystery there. What we are being promised is, that it’s better than we can grasp than can be described to us. And part of the way it is better is that there is no death.

D. Jesus has defeated death. He conquered it. And so now it is only a transition. It does not get the final word. Jesus gets the final word.

E. Death has been defeated and one day death will be destroyed

- F.* There is no reason for us to fear death.
- 1.* In the book of Revelation, John says, “And I heard a voice from heaven saying: Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. (Rev. 14:13).
 - 2.* And in Romans 14:13 we are assured that **not even death will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**
- VIII. Men and women, we need to be shaped by the four points I have set before you:
- A. Death is certain. To avoid this truth is to deny reality.
 - B. It is ugly. We do not have to pretend otherwise.
 - C. We are bad at it. We should not take our clues about death from this society.
 - D. But, Jesus has defeated it and he will destroy it. Death has lost its sting.

¹ 2 Kings 2