

I. About fifteen years ago, just after 9 PM – just after I sat down in front of some crime show to write out the next day’s to-do list - I got a phone call. And the first things I heard was, “Are you a priest?”

A. Now, my answer to that question depends on who’s asking? Technically, no, I am not a priest. I’m a pastor - and so I make a point of never standing between you and the altar. There is some theology behind all of this. But it’s lost on most people, and perhaps a bit too much inside baseball. So, I answer to just about anything people call me – Pastor. Reverend, Priest. Father. Whatever. It doesn’t matter to me. So, I’m about to start into my qualifications, when the guy breaks in and says, “Can you give last rites?”

B. OK, again, technically no. The Roman Catholic Church has seven sacraments. Protestants have two. I do not give last rites. But before I can say this, this guy says, “My wife is about to die. My neighbor goes to your church, and they told me to call you. Can you come right now? We live a mile from your house. You need to hurry.” So, I raced over.

C. And he met me at the door and escorted me into this room where there was a very, very frail woman lying in bed. And she was surrounded by her two adult children with one of their spouses. And they were holding her hand and stroking her hair. She was awake, but not strong enough to talk. Her breathing was very labored. So, I said a few things – I’m not sure what, explaining the Gospel. Telling her that there was a God who loved her, who had sent his Son and was waiting for her if she wanted to embrace him. And she sort of nodded. And so I prayed for her and asked God to reach down for her, and during my 30-45 second prayer, she stopped breathing. And so, I said amen. And we all looked at her and then at each other. And there were some cries by the kids. And then the husband – the man who had called me – looked at me and thanked me and then asked me if I would please leave so they could be alone. And said, sure. And I drove home. And I looked at the clock and I said to Sheri, well that was a pretty unusual 25 minutes.

D. Some of you are now thinking, “you have a really weird job.” And I’m not going to disagree. But, let me note that what is even more odd is that many people today have never been in the presence of someone as they passed away.

1. Two hundred years ago, average life expectancy was late 30s – which was pulled low in part because of extremely high infant mortality rates. But not many made it through their sixties. And one hundred years ago, life was still very hard. In Annie Dillard’s novel, *The Living*, she writes:

a) Women took fever and died from having babies and babies died from puniness or the harshness of the air. Men died from ... rivers and horses, bulls, steam saws, mill gears, quarried rock, or falling trees or rolling logs. ...Children lost their lives as ... hard things smashed them, like trees and the ground when horses threw them, or they fell; they drowned in water; they sickened, and earaches

wormed into their brains or fevers from measles burned them up or pneumonia eased them out overnight.<sup>1</sup>

2. One hundred years ago almost everyone had spent time around someone who was actively dying.
3. One hundred years ago, most churches had a cemetery around them.
4. Today we live almost twice as long as people did 100 years ago – and many die in a hospital. And so, we are not around death as much – but it is no less likely than before, but we manage to avoid thinking about it.
5. When was the last time you were around someone as they died? When is the last time you visited a cemetery?

E. Psalm 90 suggests that avoiding thinking about our death was a thing 3,500 years ago. Well, if it was a thing then, it's really a thing now.

F. And that is a problem. I do not believe our distance from death is a good thing. I think we need more death-awareness than we have because:

1. Death is a problem – we do all die.
2. And realizing this can help concentrate our mind on what matters – on who matters.
3. And being alert to the problem of death lines us up with the Bible, which has a lot to say about death.
4. And – and I expect this will be a surprise – when we understand what the Bible says about death, death awareness need not be dark and depressing. It can be helpful and hopeful. Indeed, we realize that the best way to enjoy our life is to be honest about our death.<sup>2</sup>

II. Last week we were in Luke 6, and I argued that:

A. Jesus' life and teachings do not make much sense unless we live after we die. I picked up Paul's thinking in I Corinthians 15 and said, if what we see is all there is, we're fools to follow Jesus.

B. But, Jesus says we do live after we die. And so we are fools if we are not shaped by the fact that: Life is short. Eternity is not. And the opportunity is now.

C. And you responded. I got a lot of emails – some quite long. Few of them really directed at me. They were more people processing. I didn't get through all of them until Wednesday afternoon.

D. I'm glad to play a part in getting you thinking. And I invite you to write long, rambling emails and send them.... to your campus pastor. I'm teasing – sort of. I would say, talking all of this through is a reason to be in a small group.

III. So, the topic this week is death.<sup>3</sup>

A. We turn to Psalm 90, the one Psalm written by Moses. A Psalm in which, he asks God to “teach us to number our days” – make us aware of the span of our life and our approaching death – “so that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

B. This Psalm – which would have been written during the forty years of wandering in the desert. After their unbelief led them to disobey God and not enter the Promised Land. As a result, they spent 40 years wandering around the desert dying – is expressing God's judgement. Which would have been pretty obvious.

1. We think there may have been as many as 2 million people. That's about 150 deaths/day. It would be a bit topic. And this Psalm leans into that.

C. The first part of the Psalm is a bit heavy. You can imagine Moses's reflection as he leads a bunch of former slaves on this death march. It focuses on God's power and eternal stability. He is from everlasting to everlasting. And then it notes how frail we are. We return to dust after about 70 years. To him, 1000 years is like a four-hour watch in the night.

D. The point being made here – which is made in other places in the Bible<sup>4</sup> – is that our lives are short.

E. We then – after our verse – “teach us to number of days so we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

F. And then the Psalm turns a bit, and continues with a prayer asking God to help us rejoice. Teach us to number our days so we live wisely AND be glad in His love.

G. We are going to focus on death - the great insult; the great interrupter; the great enemy; the great schism – in order to grow wise.

IV. We are turning here for two big reasons:

A. First, because our culture does a poor job of helping us prepare for it.

1. Fifty years ago, in a important article - *The Pornography of Death* - anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer noted that death was now the new unmentionable. That – although it was everywhere – talking about it was thought to be “in bad taste.”<sup>5</sup>

a) This is true to the extent that - in a very Orwellian move - people no longer die, they pass; morticians are called “funeral directors,”

- b) I had a Life Insurance salesman that kept saying, “imagine that something might happen to you.” And I’d say, “it will.”
2. We live in a culture that is obsessed with youth, where the old often esteem the young, rather than the other way around YANCEY
3. We live in a culture where long term thinking is looking past next quarter.
4. We live in a culture where some promise we will soon gain eternal life by downloading our brains on a computer hard drive so.
5. We live in a culture that does a remarkably poor job of preparing us to suffer, let alone to die. In his very insightful little book, *On Death*, Tim Keller cites Richard Schweder’s writings noting that:
- a) while many ancient societies helped people face suffering by helping people locate their meaning in their children outliving them
- b) And Buddhists and other Eastern religions suggested that this world was illusory, and we needed to learn to transcend it;
- c) And some cultures believe in reincarnation or nirvana – or Heaven - something we can look forward to, but our secular society holds out none of these things, which means there is no value in suffering and death destroys everything.
- d) One of the reasons we are looking at death is because our modern culture is probably the worst possible in terms of helping us get ready for it. .
- e) As a result, we live in a culture in which – to quote the poet Dylan Thomas – people “rage against the dying of the light.”
- B. But that is not all. We are looking at death because our culture is not only not preparing us, it is holding us back from the benefits of the Gospel.
1. Ignoring death not only doesn’t make death less likely or protect us from feeling it’s effects. It not only hurts us.
2. Ignoring death holds us back from experiencing the powerful, everyday relevance of Jesus’s promises to us. “So long as death remains remote and unreal, Jesus’s promises will too.”<sup>6</sup>

V. As quick asides let me note that:

A. There is a lot about death – or that is death adjacent – that I am not going to unpack.

1. I'd like to talk about the hospice movement, which I think has been a healthy and helpful thing.

2. I'd like to talk about how – once again - Baby Boomers are changing everything. They are now changing how we die. There has been an ongoing parade of articles about death and funerals in the papers, noting all the ways Boomers are choosing to change death.

3. I'd like time to lament the fact that Christians in the West are among those who fight hardest to stay alive.

B. There are a lot of specific questions I am not able to take up in the sermons – which I am taking up online.

1. For the six weeks of this series I am using the morning devotion spot to answer questions about the Afterlife?

a) Do pets go to heaven? Will we recognize each other? Can I be cremated? What am I to make of all the reports from those who have died and come back to life? Will we get a second chance to accept Christ?

2. So, sign up for the morning devotions – which you can do by using the QR code or by talking to your campus pastor.

VI. What I want to focus on today is the word “death.” There are six things I want you to know.

A. The first I have already commented on. Death is a given.

1. We will all eventually fall through the trap door.

2. The actuarial tables do not lie. Should Christ tarry, we will all die. Neither pandemics nor wars raise the death rate. Indeed, we could cure cancer but that will not change it either. We will die of something else.

B. Number Two: Theologically framed, death is a violent separation.

1. We tend to think of death as a biological event – which it is. Death happens “when the heart stops beating, the lungs stop breathing and the brain stops processing.”<sup>7</sup> But it is more than that.

2. When we die our body and soul separate – and remain separated until the resurrection – which is promised and discussed in I Cor. 15 and Revelation . This was not the plan.

3. We are the unity of a body and a soul. At death, they temporarily separate. Our body goes into the ground to await the resurrection. What happens next is a bit of a mystery. Paul says (2 Cor 5 and Phil 1) that to be

absent from the body is to be present with Christ. Many refer to this as the Intermediate State. Some call it heaven. Some call it paradise (Luke 16).

4. Paul laments the separation in .

C. Three: Death is the result of sin.

1. Death is an intrusion into a perfect world. It is a punishment for human pride. We see this idea developed in Genesis 2 and 3. We see it reinforced throughout Romans. And we see it in Psalm 90. In verses 7–11, Moses talks about our death, and he makes it clear that it is punishment for our sin. **“For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.”**<sup>8</sup>

2. We say that death is natural. Circle of Life and all that. Well, the Bible explains our situation differently. It makes it clear that we were not born to die. We should not be thinking that death is natural. We need to be thinking that death is bad. It is wrong. Which leads to point four:

D. Number Four: Death is an enemy.

1. Death is ugly. It’s offensive. It’s tragically bad and wrong,

2. I wrote the following on June 22, the day after my father died.

a) 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. He had been sitting vigil with my dad. And phones that ring in the middle of the night seldom bring good news.

b) 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. Their guess was that my dad would hold out until the last of the five kids had been in to say good-bye. Steve, my youngest brother, had arrived on Saturday.

c) 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.

d) 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.”

e) 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 (1 Cor. 15:26f).

f) It’s too simple to say that our response to the death of a Christ-follower is “to rejoice.” There is that side of it, and not simply because it brings an end to their suffering, but also 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.

g) 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.

h) 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.

E. Number Five Death will be destroyed.

1. Death is a given. It is violent separation. It is the result of sin. It is ugly. BUT, it will be destroyed.

2. Death still runs amok. It still has power. Although it was defeated by Jesus at the resurrection, it is not yet a thing of the past. But it will be.

3. In I Corinthians 15, Paul’s magisterial discussion about the resurrection, he argues:

a) that if Christ did not rise then Christianity is a bad joke. But he did rise.

b) And that his resurrection body – the first fruits - is the prototype for the one we will get.

c) And that in rising from the dead he only defeated death – mortally wounded evil – but that in the end he will put all evil under his feet. And in the very end, death will be destroyed. To date it has been defeated. It will eventually be destroyed.

F. Number Six: THEREFORE, death has lost its sting. It has lost it’s punch. It has met it’s match.

1. There is no need for you to fear death. If you are in Christ, death has been reduced to the passage through which we leave the land of the dying to go to the land of the living.

2. Death – this ultimate problem that led the existentialists to say life has no meaning. Reduced so many who thought about it to get depressed. Death has been defeated.

3. Scripture suggests that the thought of our own death can be met with joy not fear or sorrow.

a) I'm not suggesting that you should look forward to the moment of your death. I remember my dad saying to the oncologist, "I'm not scared of death. But I am not looking forward to dying."

b) Nor do I expect those of you with young children - or those who are heavily dependent on you – to be excited about your death. When I had the dissection that led to a stroke – and I was being placed in an ambulance, and I briefly thought I might die. I remember being sad.

(1) I did not want to leave Sheri or the boys. I didn't want to miss the next chapters in my son's lives.

(2) But it felt OK because they were raised.

4. But, make no mistake, death is a "get to" not a have to.

a) Paul, of course, writes that to live is Christ and to die is gain. And he says that his desire is to be with Christ—which is far better.

b) And 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. Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors." (Rev. 14:13).

c) We are taught that we do not need to fear death because not even death will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord – Rom. 14:13.

5. In fact, years ago people looked at these passages and determined that the only real way you could decide if someone was a Christian is to watch them die.

a) If they feared death then they were not.

6.

VII. There is much more to say here. I'm forced to waterski over a lot.



A. Let me note that we are not expected to cheer on the death of those we love. It might be a great thing for them – but it is not a great thing for us. I developed some of that in my discussion of Acts 8:2 in the journal entry I wrote.

1. 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.
2. His death came after he had given 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*. This is the end of Stephen's speech:  
  
3. "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!"
4. 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!"
5. Yelling and hissing, the mob drowned him out. Now in full stampede, they dragged him out of town and pelted him with rocks.
6. Stephen died under a shower 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.
7. How did his friends respond to his death? Acts 8:2 gives us the answer. There we read:
8. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.
9. The translation I first memorized said, "Righteous men buried Stephen and wept."

10. 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.

B.

C.

D. We find the same thing in John 11:35 where, having been told that Lazarus had died that Jesus wept.

E. Later on in Paul's letter to the Philippians—the very letter where he says that he can't wait to die—Paul then writes that if Epaphroditus had died that he (Paul) would have had sorrow upon sorrow.

F. I could go on but you get the point. The death of loved ones who know Christ is a bitter sweet moment and we don't need to pretend otherwise. We don't need to mask our sorrow.

VIII. Let me land the plane by giving you a chance to prepare to die.

A. There are a couple tools we have created for you as it relates to your death. For starters there is a guide book about practical matters. I do not give legal or financial advice, but as a pastor I am often at homes right after someone dies, and there is a real spectrum of situations.

1. At one end are those where the family is distraught but settled. Things are in order. They have a plan. They know where the will is and the key to the safety deposit box, and the person who passed away had made their wishes on lots of things – like who was supposed to speak at their service and where they wanted to be buried – known.

2. And I have shown up where there is chaos on top of grief. Where no one has any idea if there is a will, and if so, where it is. And if there is a safety deposit box, and if so, where the key is. And the family might already be fighting about all kinds of things. And so, we have prepared a packet. You got this card. The QR code will take you to the web site, where you will find a bunch of questions. This is not to replace talking with an estate attorney or making a will or having a trust.

B. Secondly, we have the spiritual check-in. You can sign up to meet with someone who will talk with you about your spiritual life. About what is working and what is not. Who can help direct you towards resources or opportunities or books or whatever. You sign up ????

C. But, the first thing you need to do is to be ready to meet God. Look, you need to know that Jesus conquered death so you do not need to face eternal death.

1. Shakespeare had Hamlet speak of death as “the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler has returned.” But that is not true. Jesus faced death and he returned.
2. Romans 8:1, I Cor. 15 Paul mocks death – he taunts it – because Jesus defeated it. TK32

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *The Living*, Harper Collins, 1992, p. 141 (Cited in Tim Keller, *On Death*, Penguin, 2020, p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew McCullough develops this point in his book *Remembering Death*, noting that when death fades into the background, other joy-stealing problems replace it. We end up fearing trifling things, which the Gospel does not address. P. 26.

<sup>3</sup> When I started as Senior Pastor 23 years ago, a man came to me and said, “I am the only one at this church over the age of 70.” I’m not sure he was right, but I am pretty sure there are four or five over the age of 70 today. Which means death is becoming more imminent. As one poet said, “the horizon is now at hand.”

<sup>4</sup> In the Bible our life is compared to a mist that “appears for a little time and then vanishes” (Jas 4:14), a few “handbreadths” (Ps 39:5), a swift runner who races by (Job 9:25), etc.

<sup>5</sup> Keller, *On Death*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> From jacket cover of Matthew McCullough’s book, *Remembering Death*.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew McCullough, *Remembering Death*, Crossway, 2018, p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Verse 3 – in which Moses states that God returns us to “dust” – should also make us think of Genesis 3 and the fact that, because of sin, we will die.