

Acts 8: “1 Now Saul was consenting to [Stephen’s] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2 And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, & made great lamentation over him.”

Genesis 23:

“1 Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. 2 So Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. 3 Then Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, 4 "I am a foreigner and a visitor among you. Give me property for a burial place among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight."

Genesis 24:63 “And Isaac went out to meditate in the field in the evening; and he lifted his eyes and looked, and there, the camels were coming. 64 Then Rebekah lifted her eyes, and when she saw Isaac she dismounted from her camel; 65 for she had said to the servant, "Who is this man walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my master." So she took a veil and covered herself. 66 And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. 67 Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.”

I Corinthians 15: “54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

'Death is swallowed up in victory'

Exactly five years ago yesterday, to the day, Pastor Denna and I had the privilege and great blessing of baptizing Makenna Marie Dybevik! Her loving parents brought Makenna to the Church and we baptized her in the name of our Triune God claiming His promise that He would be our God and the God of our children!

- **And it was yesterday that Jesus took her back from their earthly care and brought her to paradise!**

It was not long after her baptism that we came to the passage about the burial of Stephen that I read from Luke this morning in our studies from the Book of Acts. At that point in our history there had not been many deaths to deal with as a flock here at Church of the King and yet there were many questions about burial and lamentation... So I paused to do a topical sermon on the sting of death and our hope of the resurrection!

- **The same cannot be said of the past few years where our little Church has seen the deaths of friends & family, of parents and bothers & of children & siblings!**

In the providence of God we came to the death of Sarah in our journey through Genesis last week and will talk about Isaac’s comfort when we return to chapter 24 in a few weeks... So once again I think it prudent to spend our time in God’s Word this morning on this important topic of sting of death and the hope of the resurrection that is ours!

Over these five years not much has changed in the world at large...

- **Death is still not a subject that we like to discuss here in America.**

Many shield their young people from its reality Ironically, I think this may be why we have such a focus on death & destruction in games and the media today, which can be another whole set of discussions!

So this morning, I want to consider again the question of death:

- How it came into our world and how it will be defeated.
- How we must face death and how we are to respond.

In the passage from Luke we see in a single verse wisdom on how we are to face death & how to properly respond. We should also remember from our study of Luke and Acts that the Spirit devoted almost a third of the New Testament to Luke's telling of the grand story of salvation!

Luke provides us with the answers to the BIG questions as he tells the story of God's great salvation in his orderly account for his friend Theophilus. Adam's sin in the garden has brought forth death and destruction for the human race and for all of creation.

- Jesus, the eternal Son of God has entered history as a man to save His people from their sins!
- Jesus has paid the penalty for our sin and set us free.

As Saints who have been set free, we are empowered by the Spirit and prepared to be an acceptable Bride for Jesus. The mission of the Spirit is to bring glory to the Son by filling the earth with the Son's Kingdom.

- This is what we are called to believe and what we are called to celebrate each and every week as we gather at the Lord's Table!

In the telling of this account Luke gives us several key reminders that death is a REAL problem.

- This is why we have the focus on Stephens's death there in Acts chapter eight.

The Spirit is ready to take the Gospel to Judea and all of Samaria and then to the Gentile world as we saw in the rest of the Book of Acts.

- But in the midst of the chaos and change, we read that devout men came and buried Stephen with great lamentation!

So one of the questions that we properly asked was this:

- If Christ has conquered death, then why the focus on burial and lamentation?

First, we know that death is with us until the end as Paul so aptly explained in the great teaching which he gave the Corinthians regarding the importance and the power of the resurrection:

15:20 "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. 24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death..."

Here we see a tension that must be held together in our Christian lives:

- We know that death has been defeated on the cross and that it also will be the final enemy to be defeated after the Kingdom of Jesus has filled the earth.
- We know that we have victory over death and yet each of us will face death: In our own physical death and the death of others, until Jesus returns!

The Scriptures give us some very wise and comforting teachings about how we are to handle such deaths:

- We are to face the reality of death and not be afraid to lament the loss of those who suffer death.

And as with most true paths in our Christian walk, we have ditches or cliffs on either side to avoid: On the one side is simply avoiding death as I have already mentioned or pretending it is not as serious as it is. On the other side are those who are fixated on death, being overwhelmed by it or simply putting on a show.

- When we face death in our congregation or with our extended families and friends, we are to be the devout people who come to bury the dead and make proper lamentation.

We are not to avoid death or act as if it is no big deal: We don't read sentimental poems about how we live on in the thoughts of others or in some pretty flowers in a garden.

- Our hope is in the resurrection!

We are also to avoid what was common in the days of Jesus: What I would call putting on a show...They would actually hire professional mourners to wail and carry on so everyone would know you were making great lamentations.

Last week we spoke briefly about the question of burying our dead...Burial of the dead is the pattern that we see in the Scriptures, as we clearly saw in the reading from Genesis 23 last week & again here in Acts. We are living in an age where this focus has been largely lost.

- Gone for the most part are the family or even church graveyards.

With all of our moves and travels in this country it is difficult to even picture a family being buried together in any cemetery.

- More and more people are choosing cremation with the ashes being scattered as was done with my father and brother by my mother who also wanted to be cremated.

Now you can even go "green" opting to have your body dissolved in an environmentally sensitive way!

Now again, as I did last week, I need to stress that what happens to the body has nothing to do with what will happen at the end of time when the trumpet sounds & the dead are raised... John clearly teaches us in Revelation chapter 20 that ALL will stand before Jesus in resurrected bodies no matter where they died or how their bodies were disposed of:

"11 Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. 14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire."

- As Paul clearly teaches: It is appointed to men once to die and then judgment.

And we will be called into the presence of God in resurrected bodies, no matter how we died or what was done with our body.

So why does the Bible put a focus on burial and lamentation?

- I believe they are both related to understanding and facing the reality of death & the hope of the resurrection.

- They bring us both a demonstration of reality and great comfort!

Consider again what we just studied in the 23rd chapter of Genesis ... Remember how much detail we were given about how Abraham came to bury and lament over his wife Sarah.

Verse two of Acts chapter eight could be easily passed over, & yet the Spirit expects us to know ALL of our Bibles... There we read that devout men came & buried Stephen with great lamentation: In the midst of all the change and chaos, these men could have been forgiven if they wanted a quick burial with no attention drawn to it.

- But they understood that burial and lamentation reminds us that death is our enemy and that the resurrection of Jesus from the grave gives us great hope as we wait for the day of our resurrection!

Lord willing this is what we learned in our study of Genesis last week:

- Abraham came to mourn and bury his wife Sarah!
- Abraham came to mourn and to weep for his wife Sarah!
- Even today, even though we know even more fully how death has been defeated, we must not be afraid or hesitant to lament and mourn over our dead!

One of the most powerful verses in all of the Scriptures is also the shortest: “Jesus wept!” It can bring great comfort to those who feel the loss of a loved one in the time of death: John chapter ten tells the account of Jesus raising His friend Lazarus from the dead... Lazarus was dead and buried four days and yet Jesus knew that He would bring Him back to life demonstrating the Father’s power... BUT, as Jesus stood before the grave which contained the body of His friend who died, the Bible tells us in very strong terms, “Jesus wept.”

Death is the last enemy to be defeated because it is the greatest enemy which has brought pain and agony to the lives of all who have lived, and to the creation itself.

- Jesus, as He stands in the presence of death is moved to tears & quite honestly, we must do no less.

There is no such thing as a good death: Death is always the enemy. Knowing and understanding this, we lament over the loss of the one who has died and we bury their body as a symbol of our hope for the resurrection!

- Just as Jesus called Lazarus to ‘come forth’ so at the end of time, Jesus will command ALL those who have died to come forth!
- So the devout men came and buried Stephen with great lamentation & we must do the same!

Brothers & sisters, this is part of our being witnesses for Jesus: We are those who know that the great enemy death has been defeated.

We are those who can bury and lament over those we have lost and yet know the hope of the resurrection.

We certainly have a better truth & testimony than anything Hollywood has come up with!

- But it must be lived and demonstrated in our lives before a watching world, just as Abraham did for the men and women of Hebron.

We are to be those who rightly know the pain and agony of death, those who rightly mourn and lament the loss of our loved ones.

- And we are to be those who know the hope of the resurrection!

In closing I want to return to the great comfort that the Apostle Paul provides for us in such times from

I Corinthians chapter 15 and his letter to the Saints at Thessalonica”

In his powerful chapter about the resurrection and our glorified bodies in I Corinthians 15, Paul instructs us about the power of the resurrection and the final defeat of death at the end of history:

“51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed-- 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

- Wise words for all of life, but certainly wise words when we face the time where we must bury and lament over a friend or family member!
- In properly doing so, we will remember that death has been swallowed up in victory!

And yet when death comes to our doors and we must mourn and lament a family member and fellow sister in Christ like Makenna, it is still SO very difficult... Doubts come rushing in from Satan and our own flesh and as their absence settles in we begin to question what has happened to them and whether we will really ever see them again: We are anxious about those who have died or as the Bible often says, have fallen asleep...

The Apostle Paul knew the agony of death and the need for our comfort and so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he wrote these words to the Saints at Thessalonica who had suffered losses of their own:

I Thessalonians 3:13

“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

- Makenna Marie has died, she has fallen asleep in Jesus and thus we do lament and mourn and weep, but we do NOT do so as the world must: as without hope...

“13 But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

18 Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

- In such times these words are to be our comfort... They are our only comfort!
- And let us be comforted together as we rise and sing “In Christ Alone!”

Communion Meditation: John 5:21-24

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. 22 For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, 23 that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. 24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.”