

Peace When Walking Through The Valley Of The Shadow Of Death

Galatians 5:22; John 11:25-26

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There are few experiences in the life of a believer that have the potential of overwhelming him/her with anxiety/fear like that of death (whether one's own or a loved one's). And the fear of death may more easily overcome us if we have not prepared ourselves at all for it.

If you knew you were going to move to another state, wouldn't you want to make some preparation for that move? Surely, you wouldn't wait till the day of the move and then expect everything to be in order for the move. That would be recipe for anxiety, worry, stress, and anger, but hardly a recipe for peace on the day of the move. Now if even things of temporal consequence (such as an earthly move from one location to another) are wisely prepared for by serious reflection and planning, how much more death (which has eternal consequences and is a move from this life into eternity) is more wisely prepared for by our careful reflection and planning, rather than it coming upon us without any serious thought or contemplation. Because the thought of death often brings such inner turmoil and seems to rob us of our peace within, we often choose not to think about it or to push it out of our conscious thoughts (or to act as though it doesn't really bother us, when inside the thought of it churns out fearful thoughts and distressful emotions).

I submit that due preparation for death actually helps us as Christians to enjoy Christ, our families, and all God's gifts to us to their full potential, as we enjoy them to the glory of God, knowing we cannot take them for granted. I submit to you that Christ will consciously become more and more your life and your reason for living the more you realize that death

ushers the Christian into the very presence of Christ. Therefore, the Christian does not lose in death, but rather gains everything in death (Philippians 1:21).

This Lord's Day let us consider together the following main points: (1) Our Appointment With Death Is Unavoidable (Psalm 39:4); and (2) Christ's Victory Over Death Alone Brings Peace (John 11:25-26).

I. Our Appointment With Death Is Unavoidable (Psalm 39:4).

A. It is said concerning the Emperors of Constantinople that upon the day of their coronation, they were shown different types of marble headstones for their grave, so as to impress upon them that they must always rule with an eye to their own death (and so ought we to live our lives with an eye to our own death). Death is a humbling event to the vain pride and supposed strength of even the greatest of men and women. We all have a Divine appointment with death (Hebrews 9:27). You may be late for appointments here upon the earth. You may forget about certain appointments in this life. You may even refuse to keep some appointments because you do not want to be there. But there is one appointment for which no man, woman, or child will be late, will forget, or can refuse to keep: death. To those who have not embraced the Lord Jesus Christ as their only hope of eternal salvation, death is the end of earthly pleasure and the beginning of eternal suffering. To those who have received Christ and His free offer of eternal life by faith alone, death is the end of earthly sorrows and the beginning of everlasting joys.

B. In Psalm 39:4, David prays to the Lord that he might know the certainty of death ("LORD, make me to know mine end" i.e. to know the end of my life). David does not pray that he would forget his death (or

the death of his loved ones), but that he would know by way of frequent reflection the certainty and reality of his death.

1. Dear ones, there is a threefold death that is the result of Adam's fall into sin: SPIRITUAL DEATH, which is the separation of man from God due to sin (Ephesians 2:1), PHYSICAL DEATH, which is the separation of the spirit from the body (Romans 6:23), and ETERNAL DEATH, which is eternal separation from God in hell (Revelation 20:14-15). The Christian is graciously delivered altogether from both spiritual death and eternal death. However, the Christian will yet experience physical death, but not as a curse and punishment for sin, for Christ became a curse for us (Hebrews 2:14-15). Like illness, poverty, and other trials in this life, the Lord uses the certainty of death as a means of sanctification in the life of the believer in moving us from a mere form and profession of godliness, to actually living the life of a Christian and growing in the fruit of the Spirit of peace.

a. The certainty of death humbles our proud, self-sufficient hearts before the everlasting God. When we regularly see ourselves as mere mortals and see God as He who is from everlasting to everlasting, we will become dependent upon God not only for our greatest need (life), we will become dependent upon Him for everything else.

b. The certainty of death reveals the futility of all our hypocrisy in which we play games with God and make excuses for our sins. For there is coming a time when all acting the part of a Christian will fade away, and when all our excuses will be revealed as sinful rebellion against God when we depart this life. We may fool others, but we cannot fool God.

c. The certainty of death motivates us to take our calling as a Christian more seriously (whether in the family, in the church, at work). In light of the certainty of death, we as parents should see the eternal significance of pressing home to our dear children their need of

Christ, of living a life that draws our spouses to Christ, our children to Christ, our loved ones and friends to Christ.

C. Next, David prays to know the nearness of death (“and the measure of my days, what it is”).

1. Here David prays that the Lord would ever place before him the realization of the shortness and brevity of this earthly life. Not only ought we to contemplate how certain our death is, but also how near our death is. We may know we will die sometime, but we usually look upon our death as not occurring before 70, 75, 80, or 85 years. We may think, “Death will come, but I’m in good health, and my death is yet a distance away and not near to me.” Dear ones, we have no guarantee or promise from God that we will live to a ripe old age of 90 years. People die in the prime of life and in the height of health all of the time. People die unexpectedly every day. This truth ought not to cause us to press the panic button (for it is God our Father who has ordained the days that we should live for His glory, Job 14:1,5). But this truth ought to bring the Christian out of fantasyland and back to reality, if he has allowed the cares or pleasures of this life to blur his heavenly vision

2. The nearness of death or shortness of life should be a righteous motivation to the Christian.

a. Knowing the nearness of death should help us to see that every day is important (yea, every moment has a sense of urgency to it). Because we have no guarantee that we will be alive tomorrow, we cannot waste the time, the talents, and the resources that God gives us, but rather we must redeem everything in our life for Christ’s use (whether time, talents, or treasures).

b. Knowing the nearness of death will help us to love and appreciate the blessings of God (especially our family and our brothers and sisters in Christ). If we really believed that we (or a family member) could die tomorrow, how would we treat family member,

brothers and sisters in Christ, or friends today? Would we be more likely to sinfully criticize others, to curse others, to be filled with rage and jealousy toward others, to be a flickering light or a shining light to others of God's grace and the fruit of the Spirit?

C. Finally, David prays in Psalm 39:4 that he might know his own weakness in light of the reality of death ("that I might know how frail I am").

1. Death more than anything else reveals to us our helplessness to rescue ourselves from our desperate situation. Quests for the fountain of youth and attempts to hold back the aging process are all ultimately doomed to failure. The most powerful leaders of the ancient world led armies, conquered nations, gathered riches, and gained worldwide renown. However, they all had one weakness in common: they all died. They could not conquer death—and neither can you nor I.

2. Dear ones, it is the earnest confession of our own weakness to rescue ourselves from death that drives us into the open arms of Christ, who is freely offered to sinners (even the chief of sinners) in the gospel (1 Timothy 1:15). Christ will not turn any of you away who come to Him by faith alone and receive Him as your merciful Savior, as your righteous Savior, and as your almighty Savior. Every weakness and sin you have does not disqualify you from coming to Christ, but actually qualifies you to come to Christ for His forgiveness and life; for Christ came to save sinners. Come to Christ right now that you might be delivered from the fear and condemnation of death.

II. Christ's Victory Over Death Alone Brings Peace (John 11:25-26).

A. The Lord Jesus Christ did not come to make our lives easy and comfortable upon earth. He came to give eternal life to a perishing world. He is the Resurrection and the Life, and all who come to Him and

embrace Him by faith alone for their eternal salvation shall receive the free gift of eternal life and know the peace of God that passeth all understanding. Without Christ and His glorious resurrection, there is no reason for any of us to have peace in death (1 Corinthians 15:19). But such is not the case for us; for our faith is not in a dead Christ, who is yet buried in a tomb outside Jerusalem. Our faith is in a resurrected and living Christ, who was gloriously raised from the dead and powerfully ascended into heaven to reign at His Father's right hand, and shall come again bodily a second time to destroy death (the last enemy).

B. Let us briefly consider the biblical account of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead as we consider Christ's power over death.

1. Jesus receives an urgent message from Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus to the effect that Lazarus was deathly sick. These were followers of Christ whom He dearly loved (John 11:5). But when Jesus received this life and death message, we read that He waited two days before making His way to the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary (John 11:6). If Jesus loved them so much, why did He delay in coming to them?

a. First, Christ delayed in order that the Son of God might be glorified (John 11:4). Dear ones, God often delays His coming to us in the hour of our need in order to glorify Himself by demonstrating the greatness of His power at our weakest point, so that there is no question who is to receive all praise and glory for our deliverance (John 9:4; 2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

b. Second, Christ delayed because He loved these three disciples and would use the death of Lazarus to cast them upon Him in trust Him that they might know His peace that passes all understanding. How can this be? Dear ones, as earthly parents we so often only see the physical needs of our children. But God sees our spiritual needs and what trials will empty us of self and build our faith and trust in Him. Every delay

in our lives has a most wise, holy, and loving purpose directed toward us as God's beloved children. Will we rest in peace that He is wiser than we? Will we rest in peace that He has our good at heart? Will we rest in peace that He sends these trials into our lives because He loves us? How are you handling God's delays in your life? Are you frustrated, angry, impatient, or despairing of all hope? If Christ can wait two extra days until Lazarus dies in order to reveal His power and His love for Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, He can delay coming to you for the same reason. Let us confess our sin in hating His delays and renew our faith in His wisdom and love, knowing He has a holy reason and purpose which will both humble us and glorify Him. God's delays are opportunities to see His glory and love revealed. Only as we trust Him in the midst of these delays will the peace of God that passes all understanding guard our hearts and our minds through Christ Jesus.

2. The Lord Jesus delays until He knows by His Divine omniscience that Lazarus is dead (John 11:14). In fact, by the time Christ arrives at their home in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for 4 days (John 11:39).

3. Jesus is first met by Martha (and subsequently by Mary) who states that if He had arrived earlier, He could have healed their brother before dying (that's certainly true, but Christ could have healed Lazarus from a distance as soon as He heard that he was sick). Martha has faith (as does Mary), but her faith is weak. In the midst of her great grief, she does not see beyond her present sorrow that Jesus Christ can raise her brother from the dead right then and there if He so chooses (she does believe her brother will be raised on the last day, John 11:24).

4. Jesus then declares Himself to be "the Resurrection and the Life" i.e. to have all authority over death whether now or later (John 11:25-26; Revelation 1:18).

a. As Christ is "the Resurrection", all those who die in Him will be bodily raised from the dead with glorified bodies on the last

day (according to John 11:25; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). Is the future resurrection of the righteous a mere confession of your faith or is it a delight and joy to you, pointing to that time when death, sin, temptation, misery, tears, and sorrow will be swallowed up forever in glorious, unending resurrection life? Are you able by God's grace to look in hope to the future resurrection when you are afflicted and tried and find comfort there? Death is swallowed up in victory because of Jesus Christ. The last enemy, death, is/will be defeated. And if death is defeated, so are all your enemies defeated. Dear ones, if Christ was raised from the dead to show Himself the victor over death, sin, misery, and hell, what enemy, what trial, what affliction, what temptation is there that He cannot overcome and grant to you a peace that passes all understanding? You are more than conquerors through Christ (Romans 8:37-39).

b. As Christ is "the Life", all those who are made alive by the Spirit and who embrace Christ by faith alone shall never suffer eternal death in hell for the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord (according to John 11:26). In other words, upon the death of the believer, hell has no power—eternal life reigns as he/she is translated into the very glories of heaven. Jesus asks Martha, "Believest thou this?" You see, that (faith) is the means of peace at the time of death. Peace will flee where we walk by sight rather than walking by faith in the power, the sovereignty, the love, the mercy, the righteousness, the faithfulness, and the wisdom of Christ.

5. I also want you to see that the Lord Jesus as our sympathetic High Priest was touched with the grief and the tears of Mary and of the Jews who attended her. First, Jesus "groaned in the spirit, and was troubled" over the sorrow caused by the death of Lazarus (John 11:34). Second, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). The shortest verse in the Authorized Version and yet one of the most comforting verses. Christ is not a block of wood when it comes to our sorrows and tears. He had the power over death, yet was affected by the weeping of those who loved

Lazarus as our sympathetic High Priest (Hebrews 4:15-16). Therefore, peace is not incompatible with sorrow and tears. It is only when sorrow and tears overwhelm us so that we cannot see Christ as “the Resurrection and the Life” that our sorrow and tears are incompatible with the peace of God that passeth all understanding.

6. It is then after this display of sympathy by our Savior that He prays and then in all of His power and glory He cries out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth” (John 11:43). This is also a picture of Christ’s sovereignty in our regeneration and being made a new creation in Christ. It was not Lazarus that first believed and then was raised, and it is not you or me that first believes and is then raised. It is God in love that first raises us and gives us life and then we trust in Him as the Resurrection and the Life. All glory belongs to Him, not to man.

So you see, dear ones, the question is not, “Will you die?” That is a certainty. The question is not, “Is your death near?” That too is a certainty, for life here upon the earth is so very short. The only question is this, “In whom is your only hope of eternal life?” Is your hope in yourself, in your works of righteousness, in your parents, in your Church, in your baptism, in your Minister or Priest, or even in your own faith? If you hope of eternal life is in any of these, you will suffer, not only physical death upon earth, but also eternal death in hell as well. But if your faith is in Christ and His righteousness alone, and if you take Christ for your own Savior (and not simply as a Savior of men in general), if you receive Him as your Resurrection and Life, you will live forever in heaven, even though you will die here upon the earth. Dear ones, you need not run in fear from death. In fact, a frequent meditation upon death (in light of the death and resurrection of Christ) can be a great source of peace and prepare you for your own death and the death of loved ones.

And if Christ is able to raise a dead body that has been corrupting in the

grave for four days (or for 4 thousand years), can He not also bring life to a marriage that seems dead, to a faith that appears dead, to a soul that is dead in trespasses and sins, and to a situation in which you stand around the bed of a loved one as he/she passes from this life into eternity? Dear one, the Lord Jesus comes to you as the Resurrection and Life that the fruit of peace might rule and grow in every circumstance of death and misery that you face. All hopelessness and despair and all fear and anxiety vanish from the heart of the believer when we cling to Christ as the Resurrection and the Life. Only in Christ as the Resurrection and life will we find a peace that passeth all understanding and a peace that will guard our hearts and our minds even in the midst of tears and sorrows as we face death.

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