

## Of Death

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**Given 16-Aug-25; Sermon #1832A**

Death. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death. I think as one gets older, the topic of death and that of eternity and of life after death starts getting much more attention from us. Youth has passed over into adulthood, and with it, much of the business that has consumed our days. Hectic days that kept the mind overly occupied in a constant effort in managing our daily life. Days that seemed to stretch out before us in a race to our work and to raise our families, days without not much attention being given to the future days ahead when we will no longer be around to run our race.

But those busy days do come to a close, and they should, for then our days arrive when we finally get things in our life more settled down and begin to give more attention to our latter end, when the shadow of time begins to slowly overtake us, and we start to consider our tomorrows as a precious gift they are.

Science knows very little of these tomorrows. Its territory of concern is in the past. Our enjoyments, our pleasures know very little of tomorrow. Its territory is today. But it is our tomorrows we must try to bring into view, days that look to find its hope and ask for answers to the riddle of life and the mystery of death, and that secret we will find can only truly be answered by God.

I did a fast look in my concordance concerning the topic of death and found the word "death" comes into the Scriptures in 46 of the 66 books of our Bible. And is used around 420 times. I say around because I did not want to keep counting. So it is more of a rough number, but not far off either way. The word "dead" shows up in 42 books, and it is also around 420 times. It also is a rough number, but we can see these words show up a lot. Add in the words "die" and "kill" and we see our Bibles are no stranger to the subject of death and of the dead.

From early on, Genesis 2:16-17, where God cautioned Adam to not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil or he would surely die (He is speaking of his physical death), all the way into Revelation chapter 21, where God tells us in verse 8 that those who are "cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (He is speaking of one's spiritual death.)

Death is a running theme in the Book, and it is never too far away in its application within the human experience. But we can find—and it was not that many days ago, I experienced this conversation, I really did—is that many in humanity do not believe that they are here today and gone tomorrow. They believe—this is what I heard—that once one has life, they will always have it regardless of any physical death they may incur. What you and I would call their death is just a personal transition from this life in the flesh to another life or a different way of living.

It is here their thoughts start to get a little vague as they are explaining on how exactly they will exist. But it boils down to their life energy will be adopted into the cosmos or universe and become part of the living energy that inhabits all things. Here is where I was getting confused, of course, but I think you get the idea: death for them is not final, it is just different. They transform, but they still exist. Sounds awful familiar to the lie Satan spoke to Mother Eve in Genesis 3:4. But verse 8 that we just saw in Revelation 21, teaches that some will see death on a very permanent basis, not dancing around the cosmos with a bunch of other dead folks. Check that: other transformed folks would be their thoughts. We will touch on this one more time when we get to words of Christ's encouragement to His disciples just prior to sending them out to preach the gospel.

This morning I just want you to speak more broadly about the topic of death. As I said, there are a lot of scriptures concerning this topic. The more I read and could understand, this topic was growing into a lot of avenues to be explored, and I want some time today to talk on one of death's secondary consequences that we all run into, if we live long enough.

If you have not yet felt the sting of death near you, it is probably because you are young. Ask any of us in the older generation and we will tell you the

reality of death is seen on a more frequent timeline as the years go by. Men and women, and on rare occasions we learn of children who have died. And it seems death is always lurking in the background of everyone's lives. Solomon, in Ecclesiastes, is very clear about death and tells us in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 3 (we all know this): "To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die."

Very short and to a clear point I see explained here, and it is that we, and I am speaking of mankind generally, we have no control over the time of our birth and find we have very little control over when we will die. Normally when we read the word "time" in Scripture, we tend to think the subject matter is under specific control of when something will or will not occur, that things are fixed and predetermined, and that means God has measured or set the length of time. But I think in this verse, Solomon is just using it to make a point concerning life and death. Simply said, that you cannot have one without the other. Life and death always go together, and they both are connected within the same person's timeline. And that timeline is not necessarily fixed to a specific date, for one can be foolish. One can accelerate or hasten their life's timeline.

Verse 17 of chapter 7, still in Ecclesiastes, Solomon tells us, "Do not be overly wicked, nor be foolish: Why should you die before your time?" Being foolish or wicked can alter what may have been a much more normal length of days. It looks like cause and effect can alter the day of one's death. But I hasten to add here that certainly no one dies unless God allows it, and certainly no one whose life is hidden in Christ. What appears to be so random when someone dies, may not be as random as we tend to think.

My daughter was walking with me as I took the dog a few days ago and she goes, "People lived to be so long and old in the old days in the Bible, and now that doesn't happen." I said, "It's because of the Flood, it changed." And not because of the Flood, but it was because of the evil in the world. God said, 70 years, three score and ten. That will be enough.

We all know Matthew 10:29 very well when Jesus told His disciples, "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will." This is from the New King James version. In some other translations, we substitute the word knowledge for the

word will. Luke 12:6 uses the phrase, "Not one of them is forgotten before God." This was said to assure the disciples that they were being cared for and watched over as they went out to preach the gospel and teach of the Kingdom of God. Any worries they may have had concerning their life was under the watchful care of the Father. And so it is with each one of us. Matthew 10:31 adds, "Do not fear therefore; you are more value than many sparrows."

When we consider what Solomon spoke about death, being overly wicked, shortening one's life, and what Christ said to His disciples, we begin to see a difference in what God allows with most of humanity and what He does concerning His called-out ones. And it looks to be very similar to how He watched over Israel and protected His own on the national level as they sojourned towards the Promised Land. Today, of course, we do not see a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night around us as physical Israel did. But we are *without a doubt* in His presence through the working of His Spirit that resides in us, and He is constantly watching over the Israel of God today. Spiritual Israel has His complete oversight. To be the apple of His eye means He never loses sight of any of His saints.

Are we fearful? Fear and death seem to always be close companions with men. Let us try to see that our eventual death is not our end but more of a path or a doorway to a closer tomorrow within the household of God and within the presence of God. What we now see through a glass darkly, as Paul said, we will see Him as He is. Our faith and our hope can strengthen us in this greatly and comfort us when our eventual death draws near. And so Christ teaches us to keep our focus on the Father and to have a godly fear of Him.

In Luke 12, verses 4 to 6, He says to His disciples, and speaks to us of godly fear.

**Luke 12:4-6** "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you to whom you should fear: Fear Him [that is capital Him] who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him! Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins, and not one of them is forgotten before God?"

Consider this thought for a moment. That taking the dust of the earth and creating animals and people that did not exist to being alive is a pretty big deal. And surely it takes forethought and work to make that happen; what we commonly call God's creation or His creative abilities that He alone possesses. And if that be true, why would we think He would be isolated or unaware from the death of this very same life when someone was being converted back into dust? Consider Ecclesiastes 12:7 where it says regarding the spirit of men, "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." Somehow I do not believe any spirit being returned to God is done without His being aware of its arrival.

Is He or is He not sovereign over His creation? That becomes the question. If He is a sovereign ruler, then He must have control of it, even if we cannot see all that He does. We sing Psalm 39. That is in our hymnals, "It is God Who Orders Life." The origin of life indicates having a measure of control, does it not? And if the death of a sparrow is in His consideration and will, as Christ said, and not forgotten, how much more those who are in His image. His saints, of course, but I think everyone else also. Let us not be of those who would limit His sovereignty over what He says is His and all the fullness of it.

Let us turn and read another scripture to support my thought here. In Isaiah 55, verses 10 and 11, very common scriptures here throughout the year. We are still using the New King James version.

**Isaiah 55:10-11** "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater [we see cause and effect here], so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void [or without fruit is another translation], but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

Without any doubt, God has all of His people and all the rest of creation folded within His purpose and in His sovereign rule.

I want to turn from the topic of death for a moment—that is good—and see what real power looks like. You know who is sovereign, He must have power. So let us see what that power looks like compared to these feeble efforts men have.

Men build and work hard to meet their physical needs. Day by day and by the sweat of their face they live off the land. In Genesis 3:19, God's word to Adam when He said, "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return." Verse 23 adds, "Therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken." How hard sin has made the work of men! How hard it must have been for Adam to dig this very same ground and bury his firstborn!

There was a time when the world was not this way, and there will be again, when by the work of our Savior the last enemy, that is, death, will be gone and it will be cast into the Lake of Fire.

Turn with me to Genesis 1 (easy to find) for a fast review of God's power on display for all to see and stand in awe. This should remind us that all His promises to keep us and resurrect His own will be perfect in its day. And as our God speaks, so shall it be. Is there anything too hard for God to accomplish? Can we not build our confidence in everything He says, and know that death is not our end as it is a rest, as Jarod was teaching us this morning? A rest before we come into the fulfillment of God's purpose for us.

We are not going to read all of Genesis 1. We are going to read all God said starting in verse 3 of Genesis 1, and I am going to paraphrase quite a bit. Otherwise we will be here for 15 minutes. But we will get the point on the power of God and the accomplishments He can do in His will. I would recommend taking some time and reading them all over again and meditating on the One that can do all these marvelous things.

Verse 3, "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

Verse 6, "Then God said, 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters.'"

Verse 9, "Then God said, 'Let waters under the heavens be gathered together in one place.'"

Verse 11, "Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb, the fruit tree that brings forth according to its kind.'"

Verse 14, "Then God said, 'Let there be light in the firmament to divide the day from the night.'"

Verse 20, "Then God said, 'Let the waters abound with the abundance of living creatures and birds above the earth.'"

In verse 24, "Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to its kind.'"

In verse 26, very familiar, personal, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image and likeness.'"

I find it interesting that the first seven of the "God saids" is focused on the physical creation. Seven, we know, is the number of completeness or perfection. He declared it very good. Verse 26, being the eighth God said, with the number eight representing new beginnings, this brings mankind into view, tied to the creation but separate from it, showing the change: That God has at this point started on His spiritual creation. The sixth day ended, the seventh began, the Sabbath made for man by God for the purpose of building their relationship within the support of His physical creation.

We will leave these thoughts for another day. There is more to mine there. I am drifting away from my topic about death, but thought it showed so well how our God has everything working under His absolute power and authority. And of course this includes everyone's eventual physical death. And for many who choose to stand against God, those who will be judged into a second death, often called eternal death. Revelation 20:15 tells us that any anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into this Lake of Fire.

But for those who are not apart from Christ and whose sins have been covered by the blood of Christ, we find eternal life. In verses 25 and 26 of John 11, as He spoke to Mary outside the grave of Lazarus, He told her,

**John 11:25-26** "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Do we? That is the question we all need to consider. To believe is not just a mere passive acceptance of His words, but a transforming life that actively seeks Him above all others.

Concerning death we can ask: What is it? What is death? In this age, it is determined as being a cessation of life or the end of one's bodily functions. Most will say it is when the heart stops beating. Simple enough, if one were to stop just there. But then we could ask, what is life and what is its purpose? Add in the thoughts of a spiritual life residing within a person and things start getting a bit more complex. Adding the fact we have never personally experienced death, we are inexperienced in many of its manifestations. And do not ask me what those are. I have not died yet. But I am pretty sure we just do not know all there is to know.

We must focus on God and listen to the only One who was dead and is now alive to learn the true meaning of death and life. Revelation 1, verse 18 confirms this was true when Christ told John to write the things that he had seen.

**Revelation 1:18** "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys to Hades and of Death."

What are these keys and where did He get them? Here is where we get to my interpretation. You may have other ideas about. I will not be upset about that. Revelation, we know, is written with many symbols of one thing representing another thing. If we had read verse 20, we would see John being



told the seven stars Christ held in His hand are the angels of the seven churches, symbols being used as a teaching tool for us and are used extensively in Revelation to reveal Christ to us.

For me, the keys Christ is in possession of is representative of governmental authority given to Him by His Father. And He alone has the authority to make all judgments concerning Hades and death. And who better than the One who has experienced both. We have a High Priest who can completely relate to all the fears and adversity we face.

**Hebrews 2:14-15** Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He [Christ] Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He may destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetimes subject to bondage.

We have not talked enough about sin and the death penalty it inflicts on all men. We have not spoken of why God felt it necessary to bring death to those who sin. We have not spoken on topics of judgment and mercy. And they have a place in the discussion of death, as well as faith, our hope, and love. Like I said when I started this morning, it would be painted with a broader brush to get some thoughts of death.

I opened this message with the word death repeated seven times, the number of completion. But completion does not mean game over, but more to a point of change. Death does bring change. A major part of salvation in its process includes death, but it is not the end of the matter. Physical life ends, yes. Hebrews 9:27 tells us "it has been appointed for all men to die once, and then the judgment." And verse 28 adds, "So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation." It is not His salvation. He is in good shape.

Years ago our friend Charles Whittaker once said to me, "We live here surrounded by a culture of death." He was speaking about the condition of the world we live in and its affection for evil and sin. As I have gotten older, I see this more clearly with each passing year. As in the days of Noah, our Lord spoke in Matthew 24 as He alluded to the days of tribulation that would

precede His return. Days when men have turned every thought for only evil continually. It is hard to wrap our minds around how bad things were if it was not again playing out in front of us all over again. May God have mercy on us all.

I remember on one occasion, this goes back and I cannot pinpoint a sermon for you, John Ritenbaugh said, "In one way it was an act of mercy on God's part to bring the Flood on all except those eight souls who found favor with God. Had the people continued in the ever-growing evil and anti-God ways of living, they would have gotten to a point where many would have been unsavable, unsalvageable at a future judgment." I will not dwell on this much knowing that God has this worked out in His perfect judgment for all men.

I am changing direction here. This is my add-on. If you remember my opinion, I said I wanted to talk some on a secondary consequence of death. We have had or likely will come up against what I know many have suffered with, and that is on the subject of sorrow and grief that death creates. It is an area of work that Christ took on from the very beginning of His ministry, but not just for those that He met then, but for all of us.

**Isaiah 61:1-3** "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prisons to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort those who mourn [Christ was sent for that], to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified."

Certainly this is where our help comes from. It was not that long ago I asked my sister-in-law how she was getting along. Her answer was short, "I died when David died." This now is 12-plus years since the death of my brother and she is still mourning the loss. I get it. I get it on one level, but I also see a woman overtaken by sorrow. It hurts to lose a loved one. It hurts a lot. I do not think one can or should try to get over such a tragic loss, not in the usual way. Too often someone will give advice to try to put the end to the pain.

"Go back to work," they say. Try to get involved with this or that. "Go on a trip and let the distraction lessen your grief." "Let time go by. Let your memory fade, and so will your sorrow."

But this cannot be the right way of escape, that all you had and knew should be forgotten. Better to live with the pain than to count all of what was before as something to be avoided. That the love and affection you had needs to be put far from you. The remedy of peace and joy must come from God. He alone can heal our hearts if we look to Him. Do not hide from sorrow, but ask God what does it mean that this should happen now. Knowing that there will be a time when the grave and the seas will give up their dead, do not ever forget who has the keys to open them. Your friend and God has the keys. He will not fail you.

**II Corinthians 1:3-4** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

This is nothing less than the love of God that comes to you for comfort *to* you rather than just holding on to it. Share His loving peace with others who need comfort. When we take our sorrows to God, He will respond. If we try to stand on our own, we run the risk of falling into the emotion of despair. And despair is the opposite of hope. Left unchecked, we will lose hope and weaken our faith.

I hope this message has been a bit of help in understanding that death is not the end unto itself. In chapters 13 and 14, the book of Job speaks a fair amount about death and worth the read, and I will close for today reading verses 13 through 15 of chapter 14.

**Job 14:13-14** "Oh, that You would hide me in the grave, that You would conceal me until Your wrath is past, that You would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man dies, shall he live again? [And now he answers his question.] All the days of my hard service I will wait, till my change comes. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands."

