



DEATH
IS NOT THE END
OF OUR STORY



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Of all the fears that plague the human heart, none is greater than the fear of death. It is our greatest fear, the sum of all other fears.

We are afraid to die.

We are afraid of what happens next.

Death is the fundamental human problem.

A friend sent me an email containing these lines from a poem called "Gray's Elegy" written in a country churchyard in England:

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave
Awaits alike the inevitable hour
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

Life is short and so uncertain. **"What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes"** (James 4:14b). It is sometimes said nothing is certain in life except death and taxes. But that is not true. A clever man with a good lawyer can find a way around most if not all of his taxes, but no one escapes death.

I read an article written by Rheta Grimsley Johnson on the one-year anniversary of her husband's death. After writing about the events of the last year and wondering what her husband would have thought about them, she said he would be glad to know she had learned to laugh again and to laugh often. She summed up the year this way:

When someone teaches you how short life is, you tend to quit wasting it. Not only is this not a dress rehearsal, it's a very short play (*Vicksburg Post*, April 3, 2010, p. A4).

That last sentence seems very important to me. *Life is indeed a very short play*. As the poet said, "Death whispers in my ear and says, 'Live. I am coming.'" This is not sentiment. It is sober reality. Moses spoke of this truth in Psalm 90:12, **"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom"**

I won't be here forever.
Neither will you.

Worldwide, there are approximately 55,300,000 deaths each year. That works out to 4.6 million per month, 151,000 per day, 6,300 per hour, 105 per minute, and 1.75 per second. The Greek playwright Sophocles said it this way: "Of all the great wonders, none is greater than man. Only for death can he find no cure."

We chuckle when we read about the friendly undertaker who signed all his correspondence, "Eventually yours." He's right, of course. Death is coming—eventually for all of us, sooner than we think for some of us.

Does death win in the end? *On this side of the grave, it's hard to tell*. Left to our observations, we don't know much beyond the familiar words of Ecclesiastes. There is **"a time to be born and a time to die"** (Ecclesiastes 3:2). Visit any cemetery, and you can't tell much difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. You can intuit something by reading the markers, but the dead lie buried side by side, six feet underground. There they are, all grouped together,

young and old, male and female, rich and poor, famous and infamous, churchgoers and nonbelievers.

Or so it seems.

Death is not the end of the story for those who know the Lord. The Bible tells us what lies ahead for those who know Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 we discover truth that gives us hope as we face death with all its dark fears. We have a promise from God that death itself cannot break.

THE CERTAINTY OF THE RESURRECTION BODY

“Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (v. 1).

Surely the most important part of this verse comes in the first three words: “Now we know.” Death confronts us with many mysteries. No one who reads these words can say with certainty how much longer they will live. In a few days I will celebrate my 67th birthday. I receive Social Security, and I’m enrolled in Medicare (that’s a sentence I never thought I’d write). Will I live to be 70? The odds are in my favor, but the odds are nothing more than actuarial calculations. *Every single breath we take is a gift from God.* I’ve been breathing since the day I was born without thinking much about it. But every single breath is a gift from the Almighty. I am not guaranteed another day, much less another year.

As to what happens after we die, science has nothing useful to tell us. The great researchers have no knowledge about what happens a minute after we die. We will not get the answer from philosophy or from history. If you visit a cemetery, all you know for certain is that it is full of dead people who once were alive. Try as you might, you cannot divine from studying the dead what happens when we die.

There is speculation, and then there is revelation. Paul says there are some things we can know with certainty.

Truth # 1: We live in a tent.

I am not much of a tent man myself. I spent my last night in a tent over 35 years ago when our oldest son was almost 2 years old. On a visit to Yosemite National Park in California, we pitched our tent and went inside for the night. But Josh did not want to go to sleep. He fussed and cried and made so much noise that nearby campers shined their lights in our direction. We ended up vacating the tent and spending the night cramped in our Ford Pinto. That was the end of my camping career.

Our bodies are like worn out tents. They sag, they expand, they wrinkle, the joints get creaky, the arteries harden, gravity pulls everything downward, the eyes grow dim, the teeth fall out, the back is stooped, and the arms grow weary. Our bones break, our muscles weaken. The body bulges in the wrong places. We brag about our strength, but a tiny microbe can kill us. Sooner or later we grow old, and our bodies begin to break down. Eventually they stop working altogether. No amount of Vitamin C or Siberian Ginseng can change that fact. At best, we can only slow down the aging process; we cannot delay it forever.

As we age, we pay more attention to things like diet and exercise. Fitness is in. We've got Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig and Planet Fitness, and we've got runners and bikers and marathoners and people who lift weights four times a week. We have Plexus and Arbonne and essential oils. You can work out on a Peloton, or you can do the "Insanity" workout. You can go to LA Fitness or Gold's Gym or to one of those 24-hour gyms where you can exercise at 3 AM if you want to.

All of that is good. Exercise helps and good nutrition is even better, and it would help all of us to get in shape and stay in shape. But I have a bit of news for you. *Your body won't last forever.* You can eat all the low-carb ice cream you want, but your body will still fall apart in the end. Did you know your body disintegrates all the time? *The cells of your body are programmed to die.* The scientific term for this is

apoptosis. Each day the average adult loses 50-70 billion cells. That's not a misprint. Before the sun goes down today, between 50 and 70 billion of your cells will die. That's 350 billion cells a week. No wonder you need to lie down and take a nap. You're falling apart even while you read this booklet.

Truth # 2: We will one day trade in our tent for a building.

Think about the difference between a tent and a building. Tents are temporary and flimsy, easily torn, and meant to be replaced. A building is strong, anchored to a foundation, and not meant to be moved.

Someday we will give up our tent and replace it with a building made by God himself. That one fact tells us something important about death.

Death is not the end.

Death is not reincarnation.

Death is not evaporation.

Death is not annihilation.

Death is a trade-in.

One day we will trade in our broken-down bodies for a new body. Note what Paul says about that new body:

It is from God.

It is not made with hands.

It is eternal.

It is heavenly, not earthly.

That's what Paul means when he says, "We know." There are many things we don't know about the future, but this much is certain. We won't have to live in tents forever. Someday our "tent" will be replaced with a "building" made by God.

THE NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION BODY

“Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (vv. 2-4).

What will the coming day of resurrection be like? We can find three answers in these verses.

Answer # 1: It is like putting on an overcoat.

When Paul says we long to be clothed, he uses an unusual Greek verb that means something like “to be clothed upon.” It has the idea of putting on an overcoat, which is literally a coat put over (or upon) the body. Paul looks forward to the day when Christ returns and thinks to himself, “I can’t wait for that day to come because I will put on my new resurrection body like I put on an overcoat.”

Answer # 2: It is the end of our groaning.

We groan because of a job we hate. We groan because of unfulfilled dreams. We groan because our bodies break down. We groan because our marriages break up. We groan because our children go astray. We groan because our friends disappoint us.

We groan because we live in a fallen, mixed-up, messed-up, broken-down world, and we ourselves are broken down. So we look for a better day and a better place, and we dream of a better world where there is ...

No more cancer.

No more abuse.

No more hatred.
No more hurricanes.
No more crime.
No more sadness.
No more night.
No more sickness.
No more death.

Answer # 3: It removes our deepest fears.

Among all the fears associated with death, one of the greatest must be that we will die alone and forgotten. As sad as death seems, how much worse it must be to die in some distant place with no one around to give you comfort. How blessed we are if we can die with our loved ones gathered by our side. Often that is not possible because death comes unbidden to our door. We may end up dying in some lonely place despite our best plans.

What is the current condition of believers who die before Jesus returns? *The clearest thing we can say is that they are “with Christ” and “with the Lord” in heaven.* We don’t have to worry about our loved ones who died in Christ. They have passed into the presence of the Lord Jesus himself. That is all we can know for certain, but it is enough. Paul says clearly that the dead in Christ will rise first when Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). That’s the moment when those who die in Christ receive their resurrection bodies. Between now and then it is enough to know they are “with the Lord” and will be with him forever.

My resurrection depends wholly on the Lord Jesus Christ who rose from the dead. He promised if I would trust in him, someday I would rise with him. I’ve staked my entire life on that promise. If it’s not true, I have no other hope.

But it is true. That’s why I don’t plan on staying dead forever. There’s a reason the Bible says, **“The last enemy that will be destroyed is death”** (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Death will not have the last word. We think we are going from the land of the living to the land of the dying. No! We are going from the land of the dying to the land of the living.

One question remains. How can we be sure about what happens when we die?

THE GUARANTEE OF THE RESURRECTION BODY

“Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (v. 5).

Sometimes we look at the world around us and wonder, “Is that all there is?” To which Paul answers a resounding, “No!” We were made for something better than the sadness we see in this world.

We will have a new body—not the same as before.

We will have a new body—not just renovated or reconstructed.

We will have a new body—but our identity will not change.

We are made for a new life and a new body and a new existence with the Lord. God himself has made us for this very purpose. Our future depends on the eternal purpose of God who called us to be his children. *We are saved by an eternal love that will not let us go.* Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here, then, is a hopeful thought for anyone who has buried a loved one who died in the Lord. How do we know we will see them again? *The answer is, it all depends on where we look.* You can go to a cemetery, take a lawn chair with you, and sit there with some sweet tea and a ham sandwich. Go and wait as long as you want. You’ll see lots of death because that’s what cemeteries are all about. Lots of people being buried; not many being raised from the dead. In fact, the last resurrection took place 2,000 years ago.

So how do we know there is a coming day of resurrection? There are two solid answers to that question.

Answer # 1: He raised his own Son.

The first answer is that God raised his own Son from the dead. *This is the objective ground of our faith in the coming day of resurrection.* If God would not leave his Son in the grave, he will not abandon those who trusted in his Son. Death cannot win in the end because our Lord conquered the grave.

Answer # 2: He gave us the Spirit as a sacred deposit.

Paul mentions the second answer in verse 5. God gave us the Spirit as a “deposit.” Some translations say “down payment” or “earnest.” When you buy a house, you put down a sum of money called “earnest money.” It’s a small amount that legally binds you to pay the full amount later. That’s what God has done through his Holy Spirit. The Spirit who indwells us is God’s “down payment” on our future resurrection.

God signed on the dotted line and said, “I will raise from the dead all who have trusted in my Son.” Then he made the down payment through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It’s as good as done.

It’s going to happen.

You can take it to the bank.

By the way, what is required for a resurrection? *You’ve got to die first!* No death, no resurrection. Unless the Lord comes very soon (I think he may, and I hope he does), that will be the way most of us will end our earthly journey.

Someway, somehow, someday we’ll die. Whoever is around at that moment will take us to the mortuary where the undertaker will do what he does to prepare us for our burial. We’ll be dressed up and cleaned up and made up to look semi-natural, but we’ll still be dead.

Then they will take us in for the funeral service where someone will say some (hopefully) nice words, people will remark on how they miss us, they will sing a bit, say some prayers, the box will close, and we'll be placed in the ground.

I say that not to alarm anyone, but to state the simple fact that we're all going to do some "box time" eventually. The man who wrote this uplifting passage in 2 Corinthians 5 returned to the dust of the earth a few years later. Every Christian who has ever lived has died eventually. So far, that's the report from the cemetery.

But, thank God, it's not the last word. If you have a loved one who died in Christ, you should go out to the grave and have a little talk. Maybe it's your grandfather who loved the Lord and is now buried in the grave. Just go out there and say this with confidence, "Grandpa, I miss you, and I'm glad you are with the Lord right now. But I want you to know God is not finished with you yet. He's got some more work to do."

Then maybe you can read this passage out loud just to remind yourself of what Christians really believe.

BRIGHT AND CLOUDLESS MORNING

In early 2009 we buried my dear friend John Sergey who was over 90 years old. It was my privilege to speak at his funeral and again at his graveside service. When I stood by the casket, I reminded the folks that besides being a mighty preacher of the gospel, John also loved to play and sing gospel songs. I quoted a verse from one of his favorite songs:

*On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise,
And the glory of his resurrection share;
When his chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.*

That's our ultimate hope. We're not looking for some hazy view of heaven where we float around on clouds all day. We're looking and waiting and longing for that "bright and cloudless morning" when the Lord returns and the dead in Christ shall rise.

It's going to happen.

You can bet your life on it.

God has promised it.

When Christ saves you, he saves all of you. Every part of you is saved and every part of you will be delivered from sin. It is not soul salvation we believe in but whole salvation. The resurrection of the body is the final step in our salvation:

Step #1: We are saved from the penalty of sin.

Step #2: We are saved from the power of sin.

Step #3: We are saved from the presence of sin.

I ran across a beautiful phrase from the *Pulpit Commentary* that lifts my heart every time I read it. *There will be "victory on the last battlefield."* Life is a series of battles for all of us, and we all "take it on the chin" sooner or later. But in the last battle, the struggle with death, there is victory for the children of God.

"Death, be not proud," wrote John Donne. *God will not let death win.* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed the same truth in his poem "God's Acre." Here are the first and last stanzas:

I like that ancient Saxon phrase, which calls
The burial-ground God's-Acre! It is just;
It consecrates each grave within its walls,
And breathes a benison o'er the sleeping dust.

With thy rude ploughshare, Death, turn up the sod,
And spread the furrow for the seed we sow;
This is the field and Acre of our God,
This is the place where human harvests grow.

What an image that is: “the place where human harvests grow.” Go to any graveyard where Christians are buried and there you will find “God’s Acre.” Take off your shoes. It is holy ground. *Human harvests are growing there.* I close with the words of the Puritan writer Thomas Watson: “We are more sure to arise out of our graves than out of our beds. Oh! How precious is the dust of a believer!”

Death will not have the last word for Jesus has conquered the grave. Because he rose, we too shall rise. In that faith we take courage to live for Christ with reckless abandon because death is not the end of our story.

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