

No Fear: A Christian Perspective on Death (Part 2)

Selected Scriptures

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We continue our study tonight. The subject: “No Fear: a Christian Perspective on Death.” And again, nothing could be more appropriate for this Easter evening than to remind ourselves that what was once our greatest enemy is now defeated and conquered by our Lord Jesus Christ on this day so many years ago.

Some of you know that shortly before Sheila and I came here to visit at Countryside for the very first time, Sheila’s dad died of cancer. It was in January of 2003. We had actually decided to leave Grace about a year before and began to pursue the pastorate, but as we now know in God’s providence, He had other plans. And part of that was because we needed to stay there to care for her dad, whom we knew would be dying within the year of prostate cancer of an aggressive kind. So in January of ’03, he went to be with the Lord, but it was just before that of course, was Christmas time, and Sheila and I were trying to plan and prepare, as we always do, for Christmas, and who are we going to get gifts for, and what gifts are we going to get. We were sitting over breakfast, and I asked her, “So what do you think we ought to get your father for Christmas?” At this point, he was already wheelchair-bound and we knew death was imminent within a month or two, and she looked at me with a little grin in her in her mouth and a little twinkle in her eye, and she said, “So, what do you want back in a couple of months?” I gave her a really hard time for that answer. I mean that seemed pretty cold, didn’t it? Well, that night we had dinner with her dad, who, as I said, by this time was confined to a wheelchair, and so, I decided since she was no help to ask him what he would like for Christmas? And so, I said, “So Dad, what do you want for Christmas?” And he said, “Well what do you want back in a couple of months?” I said, “Have you guys been rehearsing this answer?” But there just so much alike that in fact they had not rehearsed it; it just came out absolutely naturally. I thought, well I can play at this game, so I said, “Fine. I’m going to get you a new set of golf clubs.”

Sadly, there are many families, even Christian families, that refuse to face the impending death of a family member, and refuse to face it at all, and certainly not with humor and with joy and with gladness. Some won’t even talk about it; they ignore it as if it isn’t even happening. I’ve encountered families who literally refused to mention the fact that this family member, who is

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even now at an advanced hospice care, is dying. Within the last few years Sheila and I have been through the death of three of our parents, and we found those times to be some of the fullest and richest of times. The question tonight is, how should we as Christians think about death? What should our perspective be? We gave some background information last week, but tonight, I wanted to remind us that it's crucial that we think about death like Christians. And it's certainly right that we talk about this issue on the day when our Lord demonstrated His great victory over death. So, let's begin with a basic Christian perspective of death.

You need to begin by understanding that death is not inherently a friend. The Bible is very clear about this. Death is, in fact, an enemy. There's one sense of course in which death is a normal part of life. It's as normal a part of life as birth. It happens to us all. If Christ should delay His coming, it will happen to us all. So, in one sense we could say that it's just a normal part of life, but in another sense, it is an enemy. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, said,

[Christ] must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.”

Death is an enemy. Wayne Grudem in his Systematic Theology says, “Death is not natural. It's not right. And in a world created by God, it is something that ought not to be. It is an enemy. Something that Christ will finally destroy.” That's exactly right. This should be our perspective about death. Why is it an enemy? Because it does what God never designed us for. It makes us disembodied spirits. We were made by God to be a two part being. There is a material part of us, and there is an immaterial part of us, and throughout eternity those parts will be reunited forever, but death tears those two parts apart. It separates us, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5 from our “earthly tent,” and we do not want to be that way. And so, it is an enemy. Make sure you understand that. Some people talk about death as if it were some great friend. While death has been defeated, it's not a friend; it is an enemy. And one day it will be absolutely abolished.

A second perspective that we need to understand about death is that it was personally conquered by Jesus Christ. And here's our great hope; while it is an enemy—there's no question about it—it has been conquered personally by Jesus Christ. In Romans 6:9, Paul says, “Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again. Death no longer is master over Him.” He absolutely

defeated death. In 2 Timothy 1:10: “ ... our Savior, Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...” He accomplished it personally and then brought it for us through the gospel. Hebrews 2 refers to the fact that He was made like us. He took of flesh and blood “that through death” Hebrews 2 says “ He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.” And in Revelation 1:18, when Jesus appears to John on the isle of Patmos He says, “I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore...” Look at those words more carefully. As I said this morning, sometimes I think we don’t grasp the reality of it. Jesus was a genuine human being like you are and like I am, and He was dead. But He defeated death, and He is alive forevermore. What a wonderful reality we celebrate today. Jesus Christ our Lord conquered our greatest enemy.

That brings us to our third perspective that we need, and that is that death is a defeated enemy. Death is still an enemy but we no longer have to fear it. I love 1 Corinthians 15:55. Paul cries out at the end of that chapter where he describes the wonderful resurrection bodies that we will have and the importance of the resurrection, and he says, “Oh death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” You and I can face death with joy and confidence, because the stinger has been removed. I cannot think of this verse without thinking back to my childhood, and when I give this illustration—and I’ve done it once or twice here before—I always have to give a disclaimer: boys and girls don’t do what I’m about to describe. But often as a boy growing up in south Alabama, I remember searching through the clover. And of course, first of all you’re searching for the elusive four-leaf clover. And then secondly, as a boy, I was looking for something beyond the four-leaf clover. I was looking for bees—you know in the springtime, as the clover’s growing and the flowers are there, and the bees are there trying to find their next meal—and I would look for the bees and as I would come up on a bee, I would pick one out, I would pick just the victim I wanted, and then I would gently step on it, just enough to stun it; not to kill it. Then with my tongue I would—hold on, not the bee; I know what you were thinking but I’m not going there—with my tongue I would wet the end of my leather belt and take that bee that I had stunned now, grab it by the wings and stick the stinger into the end of my leather belt. And when I pulled the bee away, the stinger would stay in the belt, and the bee no longer had a stinger. He was now safe. I could play with him until he died—cruel thing, I realize—but I

could play with that bee now with no fear of being stung. That's what Christ has done for us with death. He's removed its sting. It no longer brings the threat to us that it once did.

Death, then—for our fourth perspective of death—is completely under the power and authority of Jesus Christ. It really always has been, even back in Deuteronomy 32:39. God said to Moses—and by the way, who was it that was, and is, the mediator between the Father and man? It was Jesus Christ. So, He was the one interacting with the Israelites in the Old Testament in pre-incarnate form. And here, He says to Moses,

See now that I, I am He. There is no god besides Me; It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, and there is no one who can deliver from My hand.

Death has always been in the power of our God and in the person of Christ. But after His death and resurrection, it's even much more clear. Revelation 1:18: "...I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore," and the verse ends, "and I have the keys of death and Hades." Of course, the image there—if you have the keys you have the control, you have the power. That raises a question: if God has the power of death, is the end of your life so fixed that you can neither prolong it nor shorten it; nothing you do has any effect on the length of your life? Or instead, is it so indefinite that our sins and vices can shorten it, or doctors and medicine can lengthen it? What do you think the answer to that question is? Well the clear testimony of Scripture is that the day of your death is fixed. God not merely controls death in some general sense; He also controls the specifics of every person's death. He has fixed the day, the hour and the circumstances of your death. You see this in a number of texts. Job 14:5: "Since his days"—speaking of man—"are determined, the number of his months is with You; and his limits You have set so that he cannot pass." Psalm 39:4: "Lord, make me to know my end and what is the extent of my days; let me know how transient I am." Psalm 139:16: "...[I]n Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them." All the days that God had ordained for you were written in His book when you were still in your mother's womb.

John 21 tells us that even the kind of death is in His control. There are a number of passages—this is just one example. But you remember He told Peter that he would stretch out his arms, and he wouldn't be able to go where he wanted to go, and John writes, "Now this He said"—Jesus to Peter—"signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God," that is, that he would be crucified, and crucified, as tradition says, upside down so he wouldn't be in any way equal to his Lord. So, God has fixed a specific day and a specific way that you and I will die. But the same God who has fixed the day of our death has also decreed the means by which our lives will be either lengthened or shortened. Let me put it this way: if you eat fried foods three meals a day, you will die sooner than if you eat healthy foods. Why is that? Didn't God ordain it? Yes, but the same God who ordained the ends also ordained the means. What does that mean? It means you will die on the day God ordained, and you will bear responsibility if you are irresponsible. We must be wise stewards of our lives. We must do everything we can to sustain life reasonably. In fact, the sixth commandment, you shall not kill, is really a command to do everything we can to sustain the lives of others as well as our own lives within reasonable steps. We must do that and then leave the result of that with God. But death—and its authority—is fully within the control and power of our God and, specifically, the Lord Jesus Christ. He has the keys of death.

The final perspective of death, before we look at how we should respond to it, is that death itself will one day be destroyed by Christ. Death itself will one day die. This morning in the song that Kirsten sang there's a line that says, "And death was crushed to death." Well, it was, by Christ, and some day death will be completely and utterly abolished. In 1 Corinthians 15:26, the "last enemy that will be abolished" —it will be—"is death." In Luke 20:36, Christ says, "...they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection." When we receive our glorified bodies, death will not be possible. In Revelation 21:4, "[God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death..." What an amazing day to anticipate and look forward to, when our great enemy not only has its stinger removed, but it is banished from existence in God's universe.

So, in light of those great realities, how should you and I respond to death when it enters into our lives through friends and family members, and even, perhaps, the anticipation of our own death? How should we respond? Well, let's look briefly at a biblical response, then, to death.

First of all, what about an unbeliever's death? How should we respond when we have someone in our acquaintance who we suspect was an unbeliever? Well, first of all—and we get news of their death—first of all, there should be sorrow. You see this even in Romans chapter 9, where Paul isn't so much anticipating the fact that somebody has died as the reality that they might die outside of Christ. And he is filled with sorrow and concern, and he says, "...I could wish...myself accursed...from Christ..." that I might see them come to faith in Christ. There was this sorrow in his heart for these who had not come to faith in Christ. We believe very strongly in God's sovereignty and salvation, and we believe very strongly in sovereign election, but that shouldn't in any way lessen our sorrow over the death of the wicked. God Himself is described that way in Ezekiel, where we're told that He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. "Why will you die?" God cries out. You and I are to have sorrow when we contemplate the death of an unbeliever. At the same time, however, it's appropriate that we should appreciate their positive virtues. There's nothing wrong—let's say, if a family member of yours dies, and you're responsible to give a eulogy—there's nothing wrong with eulogizing those positive human qualities, even if you suspect they were not in Christ. David did this with Saul. I don't believe that we'll see Saul in heaven, based on all the Scriptural evidence, but if you look at 2 Samuel 1, listen to what David says about Saul when he learns of his death. Verse 17:

...David chanted with this lament over Saul and [over] Jonathan, his son, and he told them to teach the sons of Judah the song of the bow; behold, it is written in the book of Jashar.

And then he says,

Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How have the mighty fallen!
[Don't tell it] in Gath. Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon...

These are Philistine cities and he's saying, "Don't tell them!"

...[O]r the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised with exult. O mountains of Gilboa, let not dew [nor] rain be on you, nor fields of offerings; for there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, not anointed with oil. From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, and the sword of Saul did not return empty.

In other words, they were mighty warriors.

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life, and in their death...were not parted; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you luxuriously in scarlet, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How have the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!

What I want you to see here is that David appreciated the positive virtues of a wicked man, really, a man who tried to slay David on a number of occasions, tried to take his life for no good reason. And yet, David, on hearing of the death of Saul, eulogizes him and appreciates those qualities that were worthy of appreciation. And it's okay to do that. By the way, let me just say here that it's not uncommon to have doubts and not be sure about the salvation of friends and family members who die. This happens all the time. And it's okay to still have hope for those that we aren't sure about. If they were exposed to the true gospel, then faith could have come even at the very end, as of course it did with the thief on the cross. It's okay to hope. Here's what you don't do: don't tenaciously hold to the conviction that someone is in heaven, even if they didn't have a clear profession of faith in the true gospel, or if they didn't have any evidence of a life of obedience. Don't cling tenaciously to that and, as it were, preach them into heaven. On the other hand, it's okay to cling to hope that maybe, in God's grace, they responded in faith to the gospel, even when death was imminent. There's no reason not to have hope. That's how we respond to an unbeliever's death: with sorrow and appreciating the positive virtues that were in their life.

What about another believer? Our attitude toward that of other Christians should be different. First of all, there should be genuine grief, but not the kind of grief that has no hope. I just read a portion of David's grief over not only Saul, but over Jonathan, who was a true believer and the God of Israel. And David was filled with grief and wept over Jonathan, his friend. In John 11:35, the shortest verse in the Bible, says, "Jesus wept," there at Lazarus's funeral. He wept at the death of Lazarus, probably over the fact of death, the fact that death had intruded into the human race because of sin, and the grief that it caused those He loved. But He wept. In Acts chapter 8:2 after Stephen's death, "...[S]ome devout men buried him and made loud lamentation over him." In Acts 20:37 when they heard there in Ephesus about what was going to be happening to Paul, "...they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again..." In Philippians 2:27 Paul writes to the church in Philippi of Epaphroditus, the one you sent to me "was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and"—watch this— "and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow." If Epaphroditus had died Paul would have had sorrow upon sorrow. 1 Thessalonians 4:13: "...[W]e do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep"—those Christians who have died—"so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope." We grieve, brothers and sisters; we just don't grieve like those who have no hope. When a fellow Christian dies, we grieve. You know, some Christians act like it's not appropriate to grieve or to be sorrowful, as if that's somehow a breach of faith. And yet all of these verses make it clear that that is not at all what Scripture teaches. It's okay to grieve. We experience human loss. Death is an enemy.

And yet we don't grieve as those who have no hope, because at the same time that we experience genuine grief over the death of a fellow Christian, we also experience genuine joy. In Psalm 116:15 the psalmist says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones." Obviously here, even in the tenor of this verse, the psalmist rejoiced over the death of the godly ones because it was also precious in the sight of the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 15, the verse I read earlier, he finishes that concept about death's sting being removed by saying, "...thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." When we contemplate death there's a sense of victory and joy, because that has been defeated. Revelation 14:13: "I heard a

voice from heaven, saying, ‘Write, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!”’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.’” It’s not just true in the time in the end. It’s true now as well. So, there’s a sense of joy. There’s genuine grief over a fellow Christian who dies but there’s also joy.

And we can add one other response, and that is the response of worship. In 2 Samuel 12:20, you remember, after David’s young son died, “...David arose from the ground, washed, anointed himself...changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the Lord and worshiped.” Job on hearing of the death of his family in Job 1. We’re told he “...arose...tore his robes...shaved his head...fell to the ground and worshipped. He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.’” These are the responses that you and I should have when a fellow Christian dies. There should be grief, but not the grief that is without hope; there should be joy because of what that brother or sister is now enjoying in the presence of Christ; and there should be worship of the God who controls life and death in His hands.

We’ve looked at how to respond to the death of an unbeliever: with sorrow remembering the positive virtues that there were. We’ve looked at how to respond to the death of a believer: with grief, with joy, with worship. What about our own death? That is, how should we respond to the thought of our own death? When we find out, for example, that we have a terminal disease, or we grow old and we know that just by virtue of the years death is not far away. How should we think about death? Or, even now, some of us who are still younger and in the prime of life—how should we think about death? Well, the Bible is very clear, in fact has much to say about this. Let’s just go through a few of them. This is not an exhaustive list, but here are a few things to consider.

First of all, we should genuinely desire the outcome or the results of death—and that wording is chosen carefully; I’ll talk about that in a moment. We should genuinely desire the outcome, or the results, of death. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul says, “...[W]e...prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” Wow, think about that for a moment. Can you and I honestly say that we prefer to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord? That’s

how Paul thought about death. Look at Philippians 1:21: “For to me,” Paul says, “to live is Christ and to die is gain.” By the way the idea of dying here is not speaking so much about the process of death as the event of death and its results. He says the event of death—the end result of death for me, Paul says—is gain. Now, that word gain is a very interesting Greek word. It occurs only two other times in the New Testament. It’s a financial word. It’s used in the papyri—that is in those everyday writings from secular Greek that have been found in the trash heaps of the ancient world—it was used in the papyri to describe any gain or profit on money, particularly interest on money. You know what Paul is saying here? He’s saying that for him death is like making interest on the investment that he made with his life. In Philippians 1:22-23 he goes on to say, “[For] if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; but I don’t know which to choose...I am hard-pressed from both directions.” In other words, from wanting to be here to serve you, and from wanting to be with Christ. “[I have] the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better...” Very much better? I’m afraid we don’t often think about that. We don’t think about death and, particularly, its results, being in the presence of Christ, like Paul. It’s because we are so tied to this world; this is what we know. Paul’s mindset about death is completely foreign to the culture. You and I, though, as believers do not have to fear death. We can see it as very much better. Jesus died, as we saw, to save us from the fear of death, fear from the outcome, or the result, of death.

But let me clarify something here. It is still normal, as human beings, to fear the process of death. What we have been freed from is fearing the result, the outcome, of death. We look forward to the fact that death will usher us into the presence of God. But if you look forward to the process of death, there is something desperately wrong with you, and you need to see a doctor. Calvin commenting on Philippians 1, on this very passage, says this: “Death itself will never be desired, because such a desire is at variance with the natural feeling, but it is desired for some particular reason or with a view to some other end.” Now listen to how he clarifies. “Believers do not cease to regard death with horror, but when they turn their eyes to that life which follows death, they easily overcome all dread by means of that consolation.” You see it’s not the process that we no longer fear; it’s the result, because we know that, as the image of the poets often describe it, we just passed through the river, and then we land in the promise land. So, you and I can desire the outcome or the results of death.

Another response to our own death, to the thought of our own death, is we need to be confident that God's love will transcend death. There's such comfort in this. I love Romans 8. Paul says, "...I am convinced that neither death, nor life" —and then he goes on to list a number of other things—"death," he says, "[is not] able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Find your hope and your comfort and your confidence in that. However dark it may look, it cannot, it will not separate you from the love of God that is yours in Christ. The psalmist puts it this way—you remember that he says that our lives are like a flower of grass, the wildflowers that spring up and are here today and gone tomorrow. And then he says, "But the lovingkindness of the Lord" —and he uses a Hebrew word that means "loving loyalty," a combination of love and loyalty, the kind of love we all long for; you know the kind of love that never lets go of us—he says, "...the lovingkindness of [God] is from everlasting to everlasting." That means as far back as your mind can go in eternity past to as far forward as your mind can go in eternity future, the lovingkindness of God is always there. Or, as one author describes it (and I love this): "From vanishing point to vanishing point, God's faithful love is always around us."

Be confident that God's love will transcend your death. Be confident that God's presence will be with you through death. However difficult, however hard it might be, Psalm 23 gives us these precious words: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," because You're my shepherd, "I [don't fear any] evil, for You are with me"—You are with me— "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." You're not going to let any harm come to me. That's what the rod and staff were about. They were for protection of the sheep. I don't need to worry about anything. It looks dark, it looks bad, it looks frightening. But You, my shepherd, are with me. We can be confident that God's presence will be with us through death itself.

A couple of other responses to our death when we think about it. We should let our death be a motive to a couple of things. We should let it motivate us to diligence in this life. Ecclesiastes says, "Whatever your hands find to do, do it with all your might" —Ecclesiastes 9:10— "for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going." Now, we're going to talk about the intermediate state, that is, what happens from the moment of death

until Christ returns, next week. So, don't worry about this right now. Just let it sink in that Solomon is saying, "Let your impending death push you to be diligent in this life." Jesus essentially said the same thing in John 9:4, "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work." He was talking about death. The work in this world is done at death, so be diligent until it comes. Also let it drive you to be steadfast, that is, not to be moved, not to be easily shaken. Paul, after he describes in 1 Corinthians 15 the reality of death and the reality of resurrection, says take all of that in to your mind, and "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." You may die, but that death is not permanent, and there is victory through it.

Finally, we should look at our own death as an opportunity to exalt Jesus Christ. Paul did. Going back to Philippians 1:20, he says, "[Here is] my earnest expectation and hope...that Christ will...be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." Whether by life or by death. How can we exalt Christ? We can be faithful to Him even in the face of death. In fact, you know I think in our day, we need to understand that faithfulness to Christ is more important than preserving our own lives. We are so much into protection. I mean, people are scared of everything: they childproof their homes—in fact, I read a funny sticker this week that said, "You know I childproof my home, but somehow they still find a way back in." We do everything we can to protect ourselves and our children from every potential harm and every potential risk. Listen, it's okay to risk your life for the sake of Christ. I'm not talking about mindless risks that accomplish nothing, but to be a missionary in a place that may be somewhat dangerous is okay. In fact, we read these kinds of verses that remind us that by being faithful to the Lord to death, we give Him honor. Daniel 6:10. You remember Daniel, when he knew that that document forbidding any worship of anyone but the king had been signed, he entered his house, went up on his roof chamber, and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day praying and giving thanks before the Lord, as he'd been doing previously. He says, "Listen, I'm going to be faithful. I realize I'm putting my life at risk. I realize I'm going to go to the lion's den. But I'm going to be faithful to my God." Acts 5:29. Peter and the apostles, when confronted with the fact that they had to stop preaching the gospel, said, "We must obey God rather than men." Do whatever you want to with us. In Acts 20:24 Paul puts it like this: "...I do not consider my life of any account

as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course in the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” In Acts 21:13 Paul responded to those who were weeping, “What are you doing weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” This is how we are to think about death. We are to see death in the cause of Christ as an expression of love and worship and adoration. It’s interesting. We can express and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ by giving ourselves in death in the care and service of others; all those who serve Islam’s god give themselves in death for the destruction of others. In Hebrews 11:35, after that long list of all those victorious people in faith, it says, “...[but] others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection.” Revelation 2:10: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer,” John writes to the church in Smyrna. “Behold the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” I will give you the crown which is life, the crown which is eternal life. In Revelation 12:11, describing the martyrs of that period of time, “...[T]hey did not love their life even when faced with death.” May God help us to begin to think like this. We give our lives to Christ, we live for Christ, and if Christ should so require, we risk our lives, and we die for Christ. This is how we can exalt the Lord Jesus, whether by life or by death. The only way to exalt Him, whether by life or by death, is to be able to say honestly with Paul, “For me to live is Christ and for me to die is gain.” But here’s the encouraging part, folks. You don’t have to die as a martyr to exalt Christ in your death. You don’t have to exalt Him that way. Many of us will not be called to be martyrs. So, how can you exalt Christ in your death? By facing death like a Christian, by thinking like a Christian.

Many of us have not had examples of what that looks like, but God, in His grace, gave me a great example of that in my father-in-law, Sheila’s dad, now with the Lord. The one who got that new set of golf clubs for Christmas. He was an example of how to face death like a Christian. He finished well. A few months before his death, he delivered the commencement address at The Master’s College. He ended that message with a brief reflection on his impending death. We ended up playing a short excerpt of that message at his funeral. And I want to finish our study of death with his words as he himself walked through the valley of the shadow of death.

Soon—God’s soon, for we have no real way of knowing an exact timetable—I will be passing through the valley of the shadow of death to go to be with the Lord. I was reared in a very strong environment of anticipation of the Lord’s return, and all my life I’ve looked eagerly for the return of Jesus. What a thrill it would be to hear the sound of the trumpet, to see the heavens rolled back like a scroll—that He’d call up instantly in the air to be with the Lord forever. But most of us, if not all of us, must pass through that moment of death. But even that, too, has its delights. Can you even begin to imagine what it would mean, as you’re slipping from life, while you’re looking into the faces of the ones you hold most dear on earth, to suddenly find yourself looking into the face of the One who is the most loved? And to find yourself instantly transported into heaven? What a trip. Better, faster, more exciting than any roller coaster ride at Magic Mountain. Better than a rocket ride from Cape Canaveral. But the thing that excites me most about going to be with the Lord is that at the moment I leave this body of corruption, I’ll be purged of sin and will forever be perfectly holy. When we shall see Him, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

My pilgrimage, begun fifty years ago, appears to be coming to its culmination. Soon, I will no longer roam the campus creating my kind of chaos wherever I go. Soon, I will no longer enjoy the kind of repost and repartee with my faculty friends, as possible only in academia. Soon, my presence will be nothing more than a flitting, flickering, slowly vanishing shadow on the classroom walls. But let me tell you, as I told a student who recently said, “C.W., I’m going to miss you.” Before we get too sad about this, just remember that our parting is but for a short period of time. We look forward to that day of reunion when all the people of God will be brought together in the presence of the Lord clothed in garments so radiant that even the angels will be forced to look and take notice. What delight we’ll be having in getting accustomed to our newly acquired glorified bodies. We will see the Lamb of God, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. For the first time we’ll realize the full meaning of the sacrificial death, the suffering He endured for us. For the first time we’ll be able to fully experience the breadth of His love, the depth of His

grace, the scope of His wisdom, the extent of His power, the brilliance of His glory. We'll join the elders in casting down whatever crowns we may receive at the throne of God. And say worthy art Thou, O Lord and God, to receive glory and power, for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed and were created. Then, in chorus with the inhabitants of heaven, we'll cry out to the Lamb of God, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." Then, in perfected bodies with perfected minds, we'll experience perfect love and fellowship throughout eternity. What a reunion that will be. Now, that is an experience to die for!