

My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. (Psa 73:26)

I have been distressed over this sermon topic for some weeks now, fearing that my viewpoint might be seen as bloviating and/or over-simplifying. I ask you to bear with me as we go down this path and understand I don't believe I have all the answers and I'm not trying to over-simplify a serious and difficult topic. I want to talk today about death, and grief and mourning, because I don't have any memory of us looking at the matter of our own deaths, grief and mourning with a Spiritual eye. We certainly talk about death as the consequence of sin and the second death, but I don't think that's enough.

By its nature, death tends to become a topic of discussion and meditation only when we are immediately faced with it. The death of a loved one or a friend forces us to look at our own mortality with a critical eye. Perhaps our age or some physical affliction (especially as we age) might draw our attention to the fact that we are absolutely mortal. In general, though, death isn't a thing we talk much about.

Sam's recent sermon on taking joyfully the spoiling of our goods caused me to think about that and drove me to start wondering why we wouldn't contemplate it and work to develop a spiritual understanding of it. Like everything else in our lives, death, and specifically our own deaths and the deaths of those closest to us, must be properly considered from a spiritually centered perspective. I don't think it's enough to just think of death as some great inevitability we can't change and thereby dismiss it. It's not enough just to hold it out there as a consequence of sin and disobedience, almost objectifying it, either. After all, scripture does tell us

"... it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:" (Heb 9:27)

This verse speaks to temporal, bodily death, not the final death. Spiritual, final death comes after the judgment, not before, for those who are weighed in the balance and found wanting. It is appointed unto men, all men as a general rule, to die a physical death.

As I've contemplated this topic, I have come to think that we do ourselves a great disservice if we do not look into it honestly and prayerfully, seeking to understand it and the effect it has on us. Not having a proper perspective grounded in Scripture is what leads to maudlin, goofy notions producing the pep rally funerals, sappy obituaries and obsessions with 'legacy' we see all around us. It creates a multi-billion dollar sympathy and bereavement industry pimping greeting cards, candles, potted plants, balloons, flowers and an Etsy category instead of Bible truth about death and dying.

On the other side of the coin, not working to build a proper line of thought around this subject can lead to a hardened view of death and loss that makes it difficult to be

compassionate. We are surrounded by what seems some days to be a constant stream of mass death events, which are clear punishments from God and reminders of His power and sovereignty. The sheer number of these events and the need to preach about them can, I think, leave us numb to the fact that these aren't just a block of thousands in this tsunami, or hundreds in this flood, or dozens in this tornado. They are that without a doubt, but they are also individual people. There are impacts from these deaths. While we are unquestionably told to carry the standard and declare the truth, we aren't told to be cruel about it. The truth can be imparted with all propriety and still show empathy, because we are all of the same seed and headed to the same end. I think we do that and have a proper spirit about us in that regard, but that's still something to think about.

Consider this – was not our Lord compassionate when faced with the end of one of His friends?

“And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept... Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.” (Joh 11:34-35,38)

Indeed, He wept. He didn't carry on, establish a foundation, declare a month of mourning, hold a candlelight vigil, give everyone black armbands/flowers/garlands to wear, sink into some kind of morose disposition, put Lazarus' picture with a bunch of flowers, teddy bears and candles outside the grave, and in general make a show out of His grief. He grieved, without carrying on with “stages of grief” and a bunch of psycho-babble. He grieved not only for Lazarus, but for the impact his death had on His other friends. There is a lesson in that, to be sure. He wept and grieved in Himself.

It's okay to grieve and be grieved when you see or experience death. It's a human reaction. But at some point, and a point near in time to the event, you get on with things. These friends we walk with are part of the ‘goods’ God has given us, and He gives them to us as long as we need them – not one second longer. Christ shows us the way. He didn't mess around, He used the death of His friend to preach. There was work to do, and He was about doing it.

There's always work to do. Until we die or Christ returns without us having to die, there's always work to do. So it's about getting after it, even in the face of our inevitable end.

I think death and its certainty, more than maybe anything, ought to give all of us, at a deep, personal level, a sense and defining understanding of our own worthlessness. I know that's hard to hear, and to my dearest friends and loved ones it isn't easy to say, but it's the truth. We're all fundamentally worthless. A profession of faith, and faith demonstrating works does not exempt you from death.

We all progress toward death. Each of us has a finite, ordained number of seconds, breaths, and heartbeats. This might be blindingly obvious, but do you live your life with that reality in front of your eyes every single day? Do you wake up in the morning and literally thank God that He has afforded you another day to serve Him? Do you operate not only with the generic knowledge that you'll die 'someday' but with intentional behavior that demonstrates you don't know that number of seconds, breaths or heartbeats – you don't know if you have 1 million or 1 heartbeat left?

That is a sobering question that puts into sharp contrast our actual behavior versus what we know our behaviors should be. We don't have forever to correct our thinking or our actions. It's not just about being old or young. Death can come to the young just as easily and readily as it can the old. Consider that you may have but one heartbeat left – how offensive is your behavior to God RIGHT NOW! You don't have an infinite number of breaths to draw, so you better get right with God immediately.

No matter how great a comfort a person is to us, no matter how necessary we might think a person is to the body or ministry, no matter how much we might believe our whole world will fall apart if we lose someone, we are all progressing toward this same end. No amount of prayer, no amount of wishing, no amount of medical science or hoping is going to change that. No diets, no exercise programs, no vitamins, no pills, no surgeries. All march toward that last breath. Just and unjust alike. The righteous and the wicked all come to the same earthly end. That should drive our behavior.

Consider

“But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,” (Gal 4:4)

Even Christ marched toward this same end as a man. He was under this same law, not exempted from it any more than we are. If He hadn't been put under the law, our debt would not have been paid. There has been no man not marching toward this end.

Now, some might argue this is not true. Not all march toward death. Paul tells us

“Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” (1Co 15:51-52)

Sleep here, like many passages of Scripture, means bodily death. And I don't argue with or deny the truth of this passage. What I put before you, though, is you don't know if you or anyone you know is one of these souls Paul speaks about, and to behave as though you do would be the height of arrogance. The default position of all mankind has been, since the fall of Adam, to march inevitably, irreversibly,

unchangeably, unavoidably to the grave and fleshly death. Even Elijah and Enoch marched toward that end, they were simply exempted from it before they reached the conclusion.

To develop the best possible understanding of life, both in this world and in that to come, do we not need to understand death, its cause and how we should look at it, given we have no power in ourselves to escape it?

Remember that the world wasn't always full of death. Death was promised by the Creator for disobedience

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”
(Gen 2:16-17)

Obedience was not to be had, however. The flesh was weak, and easily tempted and led to disobedience.

“And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Gen 3:17-19)

Death was not the only punishment delivered to Adam as a result of his disobedience, but it was the one promised at the beginning, and our God does not make idle threats. He has established a standard, a plumb line against which all will be measured, and He takes action based on that measurement. His directive was clear, concise and easily understood – eat from that tree, that one and only tree, that exceedingly explicit one right there, and you die.

Adam is reminded in the delivery of his sentence that he is not a god, despite the promise the serpent made. The lie of the serpent ‘ye shall not surely die’ is called out for the lie that it is. Adam is dust, a creation of the Living God, not a creature of his own power despite how he might feel as he ambulates around. He has been taken out of the dust, a most insignificant substance. Dust is everywhere and provides no inherent value, and that is what God chose to create man from. From the dust of the earth we were created, and to the dust of the earth we inevitably return.

For all the work mankind has put into trying to avoid or undo this sentence with strange science and diets and drugs and exercise regimens, we are all progressing toward that

return to the dust.

Consider for one moment the mercy that this commandment was, which should provide context to the mercy that God's law is. Our parents had at their disposal and use a great garden, full of all manner of fruit bursting forth for their nourishment and sustenance. There was no planting or orchard needing worked, just this great garden supplying their needs with no work of theirs required for it to bring forth. All trees, **including that of life**, were available to them excepting this one. And they knew it.

The command is not arbitrary or capricious, as many would have you believe. The command was a kindness, so that no mistake could be made and the fruit of the forbidden tree eaten accidentally. Here God makes it simple, providing clear, direct instruction on what is available and what is not.

The obedience expected in the context of this great gift should make the punishment appear perfectly just and in perfect balance. They had the whole garden, restricted only by this one fruit, so when given much, should not much be required? False teachers and those who worship 'the self' look at it as being unfair and arbitrary, even bullying. We need not back away from defending this truth or be troubled by it in the least. This is the decree of the God who created all things, including us.

"The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods." (Psa 24:1-2)

How He went about to establish His order is beyond us to understand. It is not of us to think of it as anything more than the righteous establishment that it is. If you can't wrap your personal belief system around that, embrace it as truth and be thankful for it, think about why.

Nothing has changed in this regard since the dawn of time. Lack of obedience rightly drives a just punishment.

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom 6:23)

This isn't just talking about spiritual death. It speaks to temporal physical death as well.

"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come."

(Rom 5:12-14)

Death is just because it was laid out as the expected punishment for disobedience. It was man who would not obey, and for God to pull back from that punishment would make God unjust and unrighteous. It is wrong to expect Him to do so.

Because it is just and righteous, it especially ought to be joyfully endured. This isn't a stiff upper lip stoicism, acting like you are above grief. This is genuinely, joyfully enduring the spoiling of this good, whether our own lives, the life of a child, a parent, a friend, a body member – anyone.

There shouldn't be any gnashing of teeth and undue wailing at the unfairness of 'losing someone'. There shouldn't be any questions along the lines of 'why would God do this to me' when the foreordained final breath of a friend or loved one escapes their lips.

I'm not suggesting you're all smiles and giggles when someone you know dies. That's not what taking joyfully the spoiling of your goods entails. What I'm suggesting to you is that the spoiling of all your goods, including your own life, should be joyfully endured because you are thankful you ever had them. God didn't have to give you your life, your children's lives, your spouse's life or anything else you have. How from that perspective could you not be joyful when you lose something?

I'm not suggesting that there isn't grieving to do. What I am suggesting is that there is a necessity put upon us to truly, genuinely, intentionally take joyfully the spoiling of every good, and whatever work you have to do individually to get your heart and mind there, you have to do.

I don't want to be repetitive here, but this is a critical element to understand, embrace and mold our behaviors toward. Remember this, please. Our lives are not our own. Our parent's lives are not our own. Our children's lives are not our own. Our spouse's lives are not our own. How much thought do you give to the loss of grass on your lawn? Remember, all flesh is as grass and it withers away. There is a reason that metaphor is repeatedly used.

How we react to death matters. It was important enough to be called out specifically in the law:

“Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks upon you: I am the LORD.” (Lev 19:28)

These behaviors were common among the heathen Canaanites as part of their pagan worship. They made grief into a major production. There was no sense of reverence or respect for the God who created them; in truth, they made someone else's death about themselves. No fear of God, no genuine solemnity, just a show. And a show for

what? What do these displays accomplish?

The reason various pagan religions expressed for doing this cutting was that the sacrifice of blood might impact the disposition of the dead person's soul. Like lighting candles in a Catholic church, for example. Pagans didn't do it just for the dead. It was a pervasive practice that went at least as far back as the followers of Isis in Egypt, probably back even before the flood of Noah. This idea of letting blood flow from your body to appease a god is also found still in pagan religions in Asia, it has practitioners in Druidism, South American sun worshippers and other places. It is a bizarre bastardization of the recognition that blood is required to atone for sin, but such a sick humanization of that blessed concept is breath-taking if you think about it too long.

In contrast, under God's law, the High Priest and his attendant priests were forbidden from participating in death rituals lest they be defiled:

“And the LORD said unto Moses, Speak unto the priests the sons of Aaron, and say unto them, There shall none be defiled for the dead among his people: But for his kin, that is near unto him, that is, for his mother, and for his father, and for his son, and for his daughter, and for his brother, And for his sister a virgin, that is nigh unto him, which hath had no husband; for her may he be defiled. But he shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself. They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corner of their beard, nor make any cuttings in their flesh. They shall be holy unto their God, and not profane the name of their God: for the offerings of the LORD made by fire, and the bread of their God, they do offer: therefore they shall be holy.” (Lev 21:1-6)

And just a few verses later this is reinforced

“And he that is the high priest among his brethren, upon whose head the anointing oil was poured, and that is consecrated to put on the garments, shall not uncover his head, nor rend his clothes; Neither shall he go in to any dead body, nor defile himself for his father, or for his mother; Neither shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the crown of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD.” (Lev 21:10-12)

Remember that it didn't require direct contact with the body of the dead to be defiled:

“This is the law, when a man dieth in a tent: all that come into the tent, and all that is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days. And every open vessel, which hath no covering bound upon it, is unclean. And whosoever toucheth one that is slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.” (Num 19:14-16)

This issue of uncleanness relating to the dead was serious business, especially for the sacrificial priesthood. When Aaron suffered the loss of his two sons over the unsanctified fire, Moses stepped in immediately to warn Aaron and his other sons not to rend their clothes or defile themselves, remember. These priests had to separate themselves from the rituals that were performed for the dead with only that narrow exception given. Which leads to an interesting point – there are no proscribed rituals for the dead and mourning. The Jews take these prohibitions to the High Priest to be mandates to the rest of the of the population on how they are supposed to behave, and of course in typical fashion take them to extremes not found in Scripture introducing all manner of rituals and behaviors around the dead that have no direction from God.

Put another way, there are instructions on what NOT to do, but not any for what TO do. I find this interesting because it indicates to me there is not a specific ritual required to be performed. From that I take that grief and mourning are very personal things that aren't to be ritualized. Though not ritualized, they must be viewed absolutely with a Spiritual perspective. We must seek the Lord and His testimony on how to properly set ourselves in the way and establish in our hearts the necessary perspective. By doing this work, we set ourselves against hopelessness:

“But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.” (1Th 4:13)

Paul isn't admonishing us not to sorrow as an absolute. The grammar doesn't lend itself to that interpretation. He tells us not to sorrow as others who have no hope sorrow. That is similar to the prohibition in the Law against cutting oneself over the dead. We must separate ourselves from the patterns and behaviors of the Gentiles, especially as it relates to this issue of death and dying. They exhibit these behaviors because they have no hope. This flesh is all they have and they can see nothing beyond it.

There are some examples of how to treat this matter. We have already looked at how Christ behaved as His friend lay dead in the tomb. There are two other incidents that I think are probably the most helpful in seeing a good perspective.

First, let's look at the issue of Abraham and Isaac. There are many, many lessons, a book of sermons that could be written about this event, but I want to focus on this simple point. Abraham knew what was going to happen. Either God would deliver his son, or he would slay him. There was no other option. He had orders, and he followed through with them.

Imagine the heaviness of heart Abraham must have had as they trekked along with the two servants and a bundle of wood, and of course the knife he carried in preparation to slay his young son.

Many of us have lost children in the womb. Heart-wrenching is not sufficient language to describe how that feels. Can you imagine knowing your son was to die, at **your own hand**, because God commanded it, and being able to turn to him and say, without bitterness or reluctance in your voice

“And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.” (Gen 22:8)

To set aside the grief and the dreadful anticipation of what was about to happen and speak truth to his son, without resistance, without dissembling is a beautiful example. He saw the greater end that Isaac would have, he saw the need to obey, and he was prepared to do it, despite the grief that must have weighed him down as a stone on his heart. That is Paul’s admonishment. Not to act as though there is no grief. Not to deny this feeling that God has made a part of us, but to properly address it because this flesh, this decaying mortal shell must needs pass. However it is that the flesh fails, it is of God, and let us rejoice in the righteousness of our God!

David provides for me another example worth noting.

“And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.” (2Sa 12:22-23)

When in distress over what appears to be the end of a person, whether by illness, age or accident, how do we not draw near to God in prayer to ask for deliverance? It is our duty and indeed our only recourse. David had gone into his private space, placed himself on the ground and entreated God for the dying child. In his deepest grief and distress, he wasn’t splashing it about so everyone saw him and knew his state. His servants and the elders of his house arose and “went in to him” (1Sa 12:17).

We can’t bring back the dead. We can’t do a single thing for them once they enter the grave. While they walk with us, we can pray for them, for their comfort, their relief from affliction and their hearts being in the right place with God, for strength to help them while they still draw breath.

Does the thought of losing someone make you sad? I understand that. I don’t think that’s wrong, and it’s certainly not unnatural. Should you stay in that place? No. Absolutely not.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” (Psa 23:4)

In this valley of the shadow of death, a place Bunyan does a wonderful job of depicting

in *Pilgrim's Progress*, there is no need to fear the evil of death, and those who see God for the sovereign, just and righteous God that He is, who has created these frames and established their position in the universe will understand why. Because

“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.” (Psa 116:15)

The death of God's people is not a thing to be feared, not an event for anyone – those experiencing it firsthand or those seeing their loved ones die – to draw back from God in the throes of it. The death of God's people is the completion of their race. The drawing to a close of the earthly mission so that the eternal mission might begin. One cannot begin except the other end. To try and deny that or ignore it is perhaps sinful, and certainly prideful and foolish. So since this is our end, and it is a precious thing in the eyes of God, how ought we to behave and feel toward it?

*“But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course **with joy**, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.”* (Act 20:24)

Yes indeed, with joy. Taking joyfully the spoiling of this flesh as God's natural and right course, determined for His purpose. Let us live our life as the servants we are, with the proper spirit toward our lives as a material good. Let us be willing to treat it as a precious thing because it has been given to us by our God, but ready to part with it when He has determined our race to be finished and do so with joy!

Even in the throes of sorrow, that joy should be relatively simple to grasp, if we think on the idea in this (and several other) verses:

*“Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; **and was gathered to his people.**”* (Gen 25:8)

This “gathered to his people” isn't about getting buried in the family plot in a cemetery. It wasn't about being put in the cave of the field of Machpelah (Gen 23:19). It couldn't have been, since he didn't have ‘people’ there. He had a person there, yes, but not ‘people’. Perhaps a more convincing proof point that being ‘gathered to our people’ isn't about burial comes from the death of Aaron. The Lord told Moses

“Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up unto mount Hor: And strip Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son: and Aaron shall be gathered unto his people, and shall die there.” (Num 20:25-26)

Aaron was buried alone in the mountain. He wasn't gathered to a place where others were buried. He went to the top of mount Hor with Moses his brother and Eleazar his son, without complaint or distress, saw his son invested with his office and died peacefully, to be gathered by God into the general assembly. This is what should

comfort and quiet our grief over others dying and calm the storm of our fears over our own deaths. God, in whose eye the death of His saints is precious, ensconces them into the citizenship of their long home once He has removed them from this decaying one:

“To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect”
(Heb 12:23)

Let us not be afraid to discuss this matter openly and without fear or trepidation. There are those amongst us, perhaps everyone in this house, who will pass from this world into the grave. I am certain of this. We have no right and shame upon us if we hold in our hearts that we are so special we know we will not pass through that veil of sorrow. It is not an inappropriate thing to ask that this earthly occupation end and we all meet our Savior in the clouds, but to think we are guaranteed such a thing is an awful blasphemy in my mind.

I can't tell you how many tears are the correct number to shed. I can't tell you to mourn 30 days as some in Scripture did or 3 days. I don't think there is a 'right' number. I certainly am going to tell you that adopting the ways of this world as it relates to mourning and grief are wrong. Avoid them. Don't make excuses and fall into psycho-babble nonsense. Grieve and get back in the race. That is our obligation to the King.

You don't have to keep a stiff upper lip and act like losing someone isn't painful. That's just as wrong in my estimation, and isn't joyfully enduring the spoiling of our goods. If we act like we don't care, like we didn't really need or want that thing that has been spoiled when we really did, just putting on a show, we don't fool God. He knows our hearts. He alone knows the real truth of the matter.

I hope this came across in the spirit I intended it and it at least generates thought and discussion. I hope I haven't in any way offended, but if I have, I beg your forgiveness.

Let us go forward today and seek to serve the Lord.