

On Death and Dying

How do we face the death of a loved one, especially when that loved one seems to have died too soon? Read I Corinthians 15:26. It does not matter the circumstances surrounding the death, death is an enemy. A defeated enemy but none the less an enemy.

Why is death an enemy? From a biblical perspective, death is an enemy because it is the complete opposite of what God wants us to have. God is a God of life. He created us so that there might be life. God also created mankind with free wills and with that freedom we are permitted to reject Him, but in doing that, we reject life. In rejecting life, we reject everything we were created to have and to be and in our innermost being we know that is not good. Death is an enemy that robs us of that which we were created to have, life, real and eternal life.

Too often we inadvertently blame God for death. We regularly say, "God took him home to be with Him." More accurately we should say, "He died, and God sent an angel to bring his soul home to be with Him, and He gave it a new spiritual body that will not die."

As an added note, not only did man's sin bring death into the world, it also brought God's withdrawal from the care He was giving to His creation. When He withdrew His care, the land that was once ideal for growing crops became hard and difficult to till. Anything that is without God is a disaster which is why a life without Him is incomplete.

When Adam and Eve chose to reject God and follow Satan, God gave them their wish. God withdrew so they could follow him, a withdrawal that is in reality death, and He allowed Satan to be the Prince of this World for a time. With that came all sorts of evil from murder to fatal accidents. With it came sickness such as cancer and dementia. And with that came death. We will return to that in a bit. Paul spoke in Romans 8, beginning in verse 18, of the impact of man's sin on creation in general and brought it to a conclusion in verse 22. Read Romans 8:22-23

We know, of course, God was not willing that the enemy death would have the final say so He sent His Son to take our death upon Himself. He died that we might not have to and then He took death head on and defeated it with His resurrection. Read John 11:25.

That is the beginning of the story. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica that, because of the resurrection of Jesus and the promised resurrection of believers we face death differently. Read I Thessalonians 4:13-14. For a Christian it is not a good-bye to a loved one who has passed away in the Lord but an "*I'll see you again in heaven.*"

And the story goes on. Paul wrote that not only can we know that for Christians death has been defeated. Because of that knowledge, while we mourn, we do not do so without hope, but God has promised to help us get through the tough times via the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Read II Corinthians 2:3-4. We do not have to face the loss of a loved one alone. God has promised to be with us and give us comfort. That includes, as I usually say in a funeral, the promise to be extra

close and fill some of the void we have because of our loss. That in no way minimizes the reality of sorrow nor suggests we can rush the process of recovery.

We all know what has just been said, although it is good to be reminded of it from time to time. There are, in addition, some related issues that we often have to deal with. One is the feeling that a loved one died too soon. Too often we hear, "*He died too young.*" The question is, "*When it is old enough to die?*" Methuselah lived 969 years but if he had only lived 31 more years, he would have been a 1000. It is always too early to lose a loved one, even when we know that loved one is better off in heaven.

That raises another interesting question. Why is it that we **only** talk of a loved one being better in heaven when that loved one has suffered greatly either physically or mentally? Are we not really saying when we express that, that life here on earth is better than life in heaven until things fall apart for us? If heaven is a fraction of what we believe it is like, and in reality, it is a 1000 times better than we can imagine, then at the very best of times for us, heaven is still infinitely better. I do not believe Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus simply because His friend had died but because Lazarus was in heaven and Jesus was going to bring him back here. Loved ones in heaven are so much better off we can't even begin to picture it. Mourn your loss, which is very real, but never mourn what your loved one is missing out on.

There is yet a deeper issue that many of us struggle with. Why did God allow an accident to happen to begin with? Why did God allow our Tim to get cancer? Let me offer some thoughts, admitting that a detailed answer could take hours and still be incomplete. There is whole area of theology called Theodicy that explores the issue of a good God allowing evil to exist.

The issues centers around where God is when I need Him. When we don't see God at work, we can't help but wonder if He really cares? We assume that He could have been there, but He wasn't. We believe He could have done something but didn't act. We sometimes feel like Job or Habakkuk. Read Job 30:26 and Habakkuk 1:2.

When we sit by the side of a loved one with cancer or wait for the nurse to tell us a loved one is no longer with us, it is too easy to feel as if our faith has made no difference. At those times we aren't sure if we really want to run to God or run away from Him. The feeling has been described as living in the Saturday of Holy Week. On Friday Jesus died while Sunday and the resurrection has not yet come. We feel lost with no real hope.

God is not obligated to bail mankind out of the consequences of sin. He will do that, of course, in His time when Jesus comes again and sin is judged, evil punished and creation restored so there will be no more suffering or hurt or tears of death for they will all pass away. But until that time God is not obligated to bail us out of the curse of sin. Mankind made a choice and because God wanted us to have true freedom to choose or reject Him, a requirement of true love, God has accepted that decision. God withdrew and allowed Satan to operate within that decision, while

still imposing limits on him so He is still able to protect us from much that Satan would subject us to. For God to continually intervene with healing would change everything.

One of the questions we sometimes wonder about is, “*Why didn’t God just crush Satan when he led Adam and Eve astray?*” The answer is very simple and in part answers why God does not now automatically heal those we love. Keep in mind the essence of the temptation presented to Eve. Very simply Satan was saying to her, “*God is withholding from you. Listen to me and things will be better for you. You will even be like God Himself.*” Note that Satan was telling Eve he could offer something better. So why didn’t God just crush him? Had God crushed him it would have proven that He was bigger but not necessarily better and that was the whole challenge put forth to Adam and Eve. God said to mankind, “*Ok, I’ll let Satan run things his way for a time and you tell me which one of us does a better job.*” One makes a genuine decision for Jesus not when he is scared of hell but when he determines that God is better, and His ways are better so therefore He is worthy of being followed and obeyed. It is easy to express our love for God when everything is going our way but so much harder when we have to acknowledge what we find difficult to see, that He really is good all the time, even when we don’t understand or like it.

We must keep before us God’s promise to never leave or forsake us. At times God may seem distant but He is really not far away. There are times when we may not feel His love, but He is there. To be reminded of that, we need to look anew at the Cross and be reminded He truly does love us. When it hurts, and it often will, look again to the outstretched arms of Jesus on the Cross and Him say, “*I love you, I understand, I will always be close.*”