

DYING AND LIVING

[written in oral form]

Psalm 22:1-11; I Thessalonians 4:13-18
Topical series on reconciliation

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The Adult Education series on "Being Mortal" has been excellent, especially since we need to be periodically reminded about such lessons. We the "Quick" tend to block death /our mortality from our thoughts,... for some strange reason.

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I once preached a sermon on "Death and Dying". It wasn't a lively sermon. I have lifted from it a couple personal experiences.

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In the Christian context, death leads us to the topic of "what next", heaven, judgment and bodily resurrection, and so forth. These concepts are tricky to present, and are controversial. So, we often are inclined to ignore them, just as we do about our finitude.

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Death and dying is difficult and uncomfortable to talk about, yet death is something we must all face; we don't have a choice, and so preparation is helpful, as difficult as that may seem.

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Given our druthers, we would probably wish to die quickly **or** quietly at night in our sleep. But,... that's NOT usually how it goes. Most people don't die quickly and easily. Thus, I think it is appropriate, periodically, to face the reality of death and dying.

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We generally don't retain a conscious engagement with our mortality,  
Yet, we are infatuated with death.  
We are infatuated with death, and we are frightened by it.

I Googled "Songs about death", and over 600 million sites were listed. I didn't read all of them, but it did expose how significant the fascination is, even though uncomfortable.

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Death is one of the 3 biggest challenges we will likely face in life.
The three are: birth, parenting and death. And interestingly, none of the three require formal training or prior experience.

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All of us have had some exposure to death; we know someone who has died.

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I've had a lot of exposure to death, most were in the roll of being a pastor, but there were others, too.

When I was young, I experienced a seven year old friend of mine who died in a canoe accident and also my grandparents passing. I felt the loss and the void, but for the most part, my youth insulated me from feeling any deep sense of what death was about.

I was young.
Death rarely is an issue for the young,...fortunately.

For me, It became more profound at age 35, when my close friend died of cancer. His name was Hal, and I watched him slowly and painfully die, and that experience hit me hard, yet.....it didn't completely sink in.

Death was still something for someone else, but for not me.

It did hit "home," when my parents died. More on that later.

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Let's look for a moment at the I Thessalonians Chapter 4 text.

In verse 13, Paul stated, "But we do not want you to be uninformed..."

**It is important to be informed**, yet informed doesn't necessarily mean having concise, concrete answers.

In this context of the early church: they were thinking that Christ's promise to return would happen very soon. They were waiting for the second coming. However, "the anticipated second coming" was taking a long time, and some were beginning to die, before it happened. They were concerned about what was to become of those who died before Christ's return.

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Reading on: "...you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

Paul reassures them that death is not the end. Their grief from the loss of loved ones should be different because **there is** hope: hope that was demonstrated by Christ's resurrection – showing that death of the body is Not the end of being.

This is an important part of being informed--death is not the end.

In the next couple of verses, Paul alters and reinterprets parts of their vision of the parousia --death and the second coming.

Things were changing, and their old image wasn't working.

Nevertheless, the purpose / the main point is to be assured that it will be fine / that God will take care of "what next".

Paul states in verse 18: "Therefore, encourage one another with these words."

In essence, don't turn to fear.

Worry and anxiety should be set aside. *It will be okay.*

Paul's intent was to comfort and affirm the hope in life after death.

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His examples for hope were appropriate for the people at that time.

A **bodily resurrection** was deeply entrenched in their belief system, and hearing that it would still happen meant a lot to them.

They assumed that the physical, dead body in the grave would be resurrected,...somehow... and rise up as Jesus' did.

After all, they knew about the empty tomb for Jesus; his dead body was used, and later, he rose up through the sky to heaven.

It was natural for them to think "that's how it is / that's what happens, yet...Paul had to adjust their thinking some, with a updated vision.

Still, the main and important point was encouragement to trust in God for life after death.

The thinking of the dead body in the grave becoming a heavenly body and then rising up to heaven continued in the church for quite some time.

For centuries, the Church held to that belief. Heretics were burned, destroying the body, in order that there would be no way possible for their body to be resurrected, ....*in case they were not really guilty.*

In the early days of the established church, people of a community would place a large tombstone over the grave of tyrants and ruthless leaders, thinking the sheer weight of the stone would hold their body down.

Years and years later, people noticed the large tombstone over former city mayors and powerful people and assumed that the large tombstone was chosen as an honour. a great tribute.

Subsequently, large fancy tombstones became a custom for the graves of the rich and powerful.

This new practice shows that they no longer believed that a corpse came back to life in heavenly form.

[E. Glenn Hinson, "History of the early church"]

Unfortunately, the fascination with bonfires and burning people at the stake continued.

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Perceptions/ beliefs change over time, and regardless of what we believe about a bodily resurrection, it is mere speculation.

It really does not impact the bigger issue– our next life!

Besides, focussing on the *details of what next*..... is missing the point.

We live by faith.....NOT by certainty.

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A member of my church in Kansas, once scolded me for never preaching about what heaven will be like. She wanted to know what exactly to expect. I knew she had her image of golden roads and meeting old friends, and she likely wanted it confirmed.

I tried to tell her to not worry, and that all will be fine, but she kept pressing.

So, I told her my image for a perfect heaven. I said that it would have two areas.

One would be a hockey rink and the other would be a music studio so I could jam with Hendrix and the other deceased musicians.

She muttered something as she walked away.

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We humans are fascinating.

We tend to dwell on what we can't control / what is beyond us.
Instead of living **in** what is before us, and trusting God for what is unknown....and out of our control.

I think that trying to control life is killing us,
This includes with relationships, finances and fears.

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The "how," "when" and "what next" are unknown to me. I think literally interpreting the passages about the rapture and the images about heaven can cause us to focus on the wrong things, and..that can be hazardous to our faith development....and how we live today.

Paul didn't know the "when" and "how" any more than I do. He thought it would come during the lifetimes of those to whom he was writing.

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The Hope in the hereafter is a prominent theme in the New Testament. We can find some comfort through countless promises by Jesus. One such example is his statement in John 14 where he assuages us to “not worry” and that God is preparing a place for us.

And, our hope rests not on the details, but on knowing/experiencing the love and grace of God.

However, trying to describe the life after this life / claiming to know how things will be after death is .. Simply vain speculation.

It is just vain speculation.

We can dream and wonder, but we don't know.

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I don't know the details, but here is my best analogy for death, and it explains why it is impossible to know or have a clear picture:

I think death is in many ways like a baby's birth: **it is radical; it is entering into a very, very new environment** just like leaving a dark, warm womb and being pushed into a bright new world.

The soon to be born baby has no idea what is next, and ..... we cannot prepare or forewarn the baby about what to expect. The baby is much too limited to receive and comprehend such guidance.

Therefore, the change is a radically new and a surprise.

***\*I don't think we can comprehend anything about the next realm.***

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Moreover, the Baby being born has no choice; the baby, whether she wants to or not, is forced to leave the womb.

Death is similar.

I believe that going into the next domain is as extreme a change as a baby coming into this domain....we call *life*.

Before birth, a baby is warm, snug, and fed.

She is in the familiar – home, and then everything changes, and I imagine there is pain for the baby with all that pushing and transition going on..... and suddenly..... there is a whole new world with lights and all sorts of new sensations.....

But, note and remember this, and this is a tribute to all mothers andfathers:
It is intended that ..the new born baby is cradled and lovingly received in the new domain, and is nurtured and cared for..... until understanding is possible, and..... the love continues, too.
This is important to remember.

I think death is like that..... We don't have a choice. The process normally is unpleasant, and we will enter into a realm that is far beyond our ability to understand, and I think all images and predictions about heaven are just speculation.....AND... that sounds scary!
But remember, like a new born baby, we will be received with amazing Love. Because God is there, too, and God is love.

We will be received with amazing love..... it will be okay!

It will be **more** than okay! We take that on faith.

That is our hope, and that is all we have.

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I think, needing to know the details reveals a need to be in control, and that need can be a big hindrance to facing death.

Anyone who tells you what heaven is like is merely guessing.  
Biblical images are a symbolic way of saying "it will be good, very good."

Having a picture of the "here after" is like choosing a venue for where we are going *next*. ..... **as if we have such control.**

\*\*The truth is: WE ARE TOTALLY HELPLESS. And, knowing that helplessness will help us face death.

Letting go of "control" will likely be our last great lesson learned in this life! Unless we die suddenly, letting go of control will be OUR moment of Zen.

Perhaps, we can learn this lesson..... sooner! If we do, we will grow in faith, ...death will be a lot easier to face and life will be fuller and richer, too.

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*I hope that Defusing illusions about heaven is Not discouraging.
My desire is for us to invest and trust only in God--the one who is beyond life and death,... and what's next.*

Know God's love is encouraging.
Let us rest our hope solely and completely on God,..and God is love.

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The dying part:  
Death, the process, for most of us..... will NOT be fun.

Few die quickly; most deaths are a long arduous struggle— life clings to life. Death is much more intense than pushing a baby out of the womb. And,.. helpful lessons can be learned in the death process.

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Some people are ready for death. For most people, it seems, the dying process is preparation for letting go.

I've noticed, that if the dying person is still alert, at a certain point he/she will acquire a sense of detachment from this world, and a new set of values will emerge.
A dying person cares little about the current hot button issues.
The passion is on life, and that new focus is an example of learning to let go.

The death process..... forces a person to let go of control, and it CAN include the transition to a new way of thinking/ being. This transition can be hard, and it is sometimes laden with torment, doubt and fear.

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In addition, there are physical changes that happen in dying:  
The dying person's hands, arms and feet and then legs may be increasingly cool to the touch, and at the same time the color of the skin changes.

Sleep often increases and disorientation is common: less oxygen is reaching the brain and metabolism is changing.

And keep this in mind: Even if a dying person is unresponsive, be sensitive to what you say in her/his presence. The person may still be able to hear and understand.

There are other common, physical symptoms in the death process, such as restlessness, decreased to no appetite and thirst, and congestion with gurgling sounds that at times can be loud.  
It is not a pretty process.

Dying is a profound occasion.

I encourage loved ones **to** to talk from the heart with the dying person: say those important things, and say Good-bye!  
"Good-bye" may be difficult to say, but even so, if you have the chance..... say it while it can be received! Saying "good-bye" and giving reassurance that they will be okay and that everyone else will be okay,.... can give a dying person permission to let go / to die.  
And, if it is too late for your "Good-bye" to be heard, then for yourself, say it anyways.

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When my father was in his last days..... I was given the burden, thanks to a cowardly doctor, to inform him that he was going to die.
Not fully grasping the situation, I put my pastor hat on, and told him in a concise, restrained manner. His eyes displayed his surprise and dismay. The tubes and his dry mouth prevented him from talking. He tried to write, but could no longer do that either.

I did the talking and the comforting.

How very strange and unnatural that felt for me, the son,and my pastor hat of professional detachment slipped away.

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The next day with him, was very different. The reality had set in and his own preparation had begun.... and I was more the witness, and less the son.

A few days later, I fully lost my father, and I lost part of my shield from death.

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It took two more years for Alzheimer's disease to claim my mother. Even though rational thought had long ago abandoned her, she forestalled her own death until I arrived. She held onto life's thinnest thread for three days, until I could be there. Both my sister and brother commented that she would not die until I was there..... She liked me best.

Her soul left this earth while I was holding her head. She brought me into this world, and I was there as she went out,..... and that reality was very profound for me.

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A week or so after her death, while I was driving my car, an old song played on the radio. As I listened to that song, I clearly remembered the day in 1958 when I was with my sister as she purchased the 45 rpm single of that song.

Then it **hit me to the core.** That 40 year old recollection was as clear as could be, AS IF IT HAPPENED YESTERDAY.

And, in a flash, today will be just the same-- the rest of my life will disappear in a flash, and I will likely be in a hospital bed suffering from septic shock. There will be fever, rapid pulse and respiratory distress.

Before long, If I can still organize my thoughts, I will notice a sudden decrease in medical activity; doctors and staff will become calmer as they slowly separate themselves from the person they were trying to save.

I will be put in palliative care , and I will notice that my loved ones have acquired sullen faces, and they keep coming up to me..... saying the same awkward things.

It hit me..... my death..... I am going to die! Life is very short!

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Death will happen to each of us..... and we have **NO** control over death, and it is something we do ALONE. No other living person will be able to walk through to the other side with us.

I don't know what happens with our spirit when we die.

I do believe that judgement waits until the "end of all time."
Our death does not bring about the final judgement.

I don't know what happens to the spirit after it leaves the body. I can only guess.

In truth, no one knows. We live by faith in GOD.

What does matter is that we understand the following:

that death will happen, we are NOT in control;

that the living survivors, as we call them, will be alright—life goes on, and that our future will be just fine,... unless we blatantly and persistently reject love / God.

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Each of us will die..... some sooner than we think, and some later.

And, the details of what happens next are really beyond us..... the citations in the Bible are to give hope and comfort.

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The clear and strong Biblical message on death has three parts:

One -- Be prepared,..... which includes facing the reality of death, and obviously denotes preparing our soul for our existence with God, beyond this life....which is living in love / being loving and gracious!

Two – That those who choose God / choose love don't need to worry about the afterlife. It will be good: God is there, and we will be received with love.

And Three – !! Don't overlook this life / your life.

It matters how you live – enjoy, engage, do life. DO Love!

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Do NOT live in fear, and don't waste life!

Don't worry about petty things, such as financial security, what to wear or even other people's life styles.

Don't waste life.

I think the three saddest words are “I should have.”

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Now is the time for us, the breathing, to live / to love.

Death will happen, and facing death may change your life.

Facing death may change your life.

Don't put that change off until the end. Today is precious.

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Let us all learn to let go of control, and live today in love.

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The hymn of response is an invitation to ponder love that transcends and to cherish each moment we have with each other.