

Death

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Date: 31 July 2016

[0:00] Amen. So, our readings for this morning were kind of a downer, weren't they?

We have Ecclesiastes telling us that everything is vanity. We have our psalm reminding us that we're all going to die. We have our New Testament lessons also reminding us that we're going to die and reminding us that judgment is coming.

Strangely enough, I have never seen any of these verses on inspirational calendars. As I was thinking about our passages for this morning, I was kind of reminded of when I was an angsty teenager, sitting in the dark in my room by myself, listening to angsty music with angsty lyrics, and thinking about how meaningless everything is.

Teenagers, I feel you. Believe me. But if that's all we get from our readings this morning, we have really missed the point.

Now, it's true that the things of this world won't last. It's true that everyone will see the grave. It's true that we can't take anything with us. It's true that the honors or the wealth that we have accumulated in this life will not follow us.

[2:02] It's even true that within just a few generations, no one living will remember most of us. And if they do, we'll just be names to them.

These things are painful to consider. But the Bible reminds us of that reality. The Bible doesn't sugarcoat it.

It addresses us as people who live in a world where pain, death, and loss are real. But if it didn't do that, could it really speak to us?

The Bible does not dodge the hard truths. Instead, it gives us the strength and the ability to look the hard truths right in the face and to see a light that is greater than the darkness and a hope that is stronger than pain and death.

And we have to hear the bad news to appreciate the good news. And the Bible does give us the bad news. But it also tells us that the good news is greater.

[3:14] And I want us to look together at a portion of our psalm for this morning, Psalm 49. I prefer the ESV translation of this psalm over the one in the prayer book.

So I'm going to be using that as my text. But the two translations are close enough that if you're following in your prayer book, that's fine too. So this psalm has a kind of personal significance for me.

When I was an optimistic and probably naive first year seminarian, seminarians are like clergy only worse, a friend and classmate of mine came to me with an idea.

Now over the course of the previous summer, he had been in conversation with a street preacher who had convinced him that street preaching is a really awesome thing and that you can do it without being a jerk to people.

Well, he'd been trying it, and he invited me to come along with him. So I went with him a couple of times to the farmer's market in Madison, Wisconsin, which is one of the most secular cities in the entire country.

[4:28] That didn't go over so well. I preached my first street sermon from this psalm. Needless to say, in that environment, we were not so well received.

The psalm made people uncomfortable, understandably, and we got called religious fanatics. Now I'm not expecting any of you to call me a religious fanatic after the service this morning, but if you do, it will not be the first time.

Psalm 49 reminds us that we're all going to the grave, and it reminds us that there is only one way to be rescued from that. We need to be reminded of both.

So let's start in verse 10. Even the wise die, the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others.

Everyone dies, wise or fool. I remember when I first became aware that I was really, truly going to die one day. Now everyone knows that on some level, but I remember when it became real to me. [5:40] I was a teenager at the time, and the realization ultimately led me to faith in Christ. One night, right down the road from my house, a young man died in an ATV accident.

The sirens and the flashing lights from the scene, as I looked out the window, left an imprint in my memory. I didn't know this young guy personally, but I knew some of his family.

As I thought about what had happened, I realized that death sometimes comes unexpectedly and tragically, and it can strike anyone, young or old. It doesn't matter.

Not long after that, one of my classmates, driving to school one morning, crashed her car into a school bus and died at the scene of the accident. I'd been in class with her every single day, and all of a sudden she was gone.

I started to realize even more fully that it could all be gone in an instant. I would die. It might come unexpectedly, and as the psalmist reminds us, I wouldn't be taking any of my stuff with me.

[6:45] I began to wonder if there is anything that really lasts, and if death has the final word. More on that in a minute. In verses 11 and 12 we read, Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations.

Though they called lands by their own names, man in his pomp will not remain. He is like the beasts that perish. Even the greatest go to the grave.

Those whose accomplishments merited cities or states or even nations being named after them.

They go to the grave too. In his four quartets, the great poet T.S. Eliot put it this way, The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters, the generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers, distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees, industrial lords and contractors, all go into the dark.

There's no room for arrogance, no room for pomp, no room for boasting. If our pomp, our vanity, follows us into the grave, even if the wealth that we have piled up doesn't, it means nothing, except that we have perished like beasts.

Hard words, but words that we have to hear. Psalmist continues, This is the path of those who have foolish confidence. Yet after them, people approve of their boasts.

[8:23] Like sheep are they appointed for Sheol. Death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell.

Now, if you have foolish confidence, vanity, pride in yourself and your accomplishments, a sense of superiority over others, you can leave quite the reputation behind you.

But it stays behind. It might stay fresh in the minds of those who come after you, maybe even for quite some time. But it won't benefit you at all.

Indeed, foolish confidence will sink a person down into the grave, never to rise again. It will lead to death and destruction, as surely as sheep are led to the slaughter.

Hard words, painful words, but true words. Verse 15 is at the heart of this whole psalm.

[9:31] If we miss what we read there, we've missed the whole point. We've missed the hope at the heart of the psalm. We read, But God will ransom my soul from Sheol, for He will receive me.

God will ransom us from the grave. God will rescue us from the domain of death. God will rescue us from destruction.

God will receive us if we place our faith in Him. God can do it, and God will do it. Now, earlier in the psalm, we saw this when we recited it, we read, Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly, and can never suffice, that he should live on forever, and never see the pit.

I can't ransom any of you from the grave. None of you can do that for me.

Why? The price is greater than what we can pay. The wages of sin is death, and we've each earned death for ourselves through our own sins.

[10:52] We can't rescue ourselves, much less each other. But there is one who can. A perfect, sinless one.

A perfect man. A man who is also God, and his name is Jesus Christ. He can ransom us. He can pay the cost.

He ransoms us by paying the price for our sins, the price of his own precious blood, which cleanses us from all unrighteousness. He ransoms us by dying the death that we deserve on the cross.

He ransoms us by defeating death itself, instead of being defeated by death, rising again on the third day. So we read in Hebrews 2, Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself, speaking of Jesus, likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who, through fear of death, were subject to lifelong slavery.

Now will we, each of us, go into the grave? Well, unless the Lord returns before we die, we will.

[12 : 19] But, we don't have to be afraid anymore. If we have faith in Jesus, that is not the end of the story.

God will ransom our souls from the power of death. He will receive us into the eternal blessedness prepared for those who love him. Because Jesus has paid our ransom, we have been justified by his blood, and we share in his victory over death.

Now thinking again on my own experience, my teenage self, by God's grace, came to realize that there is something that lasts.

That death doesn't have the last word. I found what I was looking for in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it changed my life.

Remember a senior priest, a mentor of mine, talking about the experience of traveling to officiate at the funeral of a friend. Now as he was driving, he was listening to Bach.

[13 : 29] Now thinking on the fact that Bach is still remembered centuries after his death, he was reminded that most of us won't be remembered unless God remembers us. But the gospel tells us that God does remember us.

The penitent thief, being crucified next to Jesus, said to him, Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. How does Jesus respond to him?

What did Jesus say? Anyone? Today you will be with me in paradise. Jesus remembers us.

If our faith is in Jesus Christ, we have the assurance that God remembers us, and that means that death has no dominion over us.

Now recently, I watched the film Barry Lyndon from the famous director Stanley Kubrick. Anyone seen it? Yeah? Joel? We're fellow movie geeks.

[14 : 35] So... Thank you for being my plant in the congregation there. Now it's about an ambitious young Irishman who climbs through the ranks of society only to fall and fall hard at the end.

As the movie kind of came to a close, the epilogue really struck me. Here's what it said. It was in the reign of George III that the aforesaid persons lived and quarreled.

Good and bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, they are all equal now. They're all equal now because regardless of their accomplishments or their achievements or their pride or their misfortunes, all of them have died.

Even the wise die. The stupid and the fool alike must perish. As I said last Sunday, we will never get out of this world alive. But... But... If we have faith in Jesus, we will depart this life in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.

As Paul writes in Romans 8, if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

[16 : 01] Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us even now. As a guarantee that our bodies will be raised to everlasting joy as Jesus Christ was raised.

And isn't that amazing? We will not go into the grave as those who will never again see the light of day. No. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's and He will ransom us from the grave.

He will receive us into His kingdom. So this morning, do you know that hope? The hope that is found through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Are you ready to live and if need be to die for that hope? Are you living according to the truth and the reality that the stuff that you accumulate, the honors that you acquire, the accomplishments that you might be tempted to boast about will not follow you out of this life.

The desert monk, St. Anthony the Great, once said, what benefit is there in possessing these things that we do not take with us? Why not rather own those things that we are able to take with us?

[17 : 27] Such things as prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, concern for the poor, faith in Christ, freedom from anger, and hospitality.

We can only take with us that which flows from our faith in Jesus Christ. From God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

Because faith in Jesus Christ alone is the means through which God will ransom our souls from the power of death. There is hope that is stronger than death and it is found in Jesus in Him alone.

Death does not have the last word through those who are in Christ. Because Christ is risen, the victory belongs to Him and we belong to Him too.

Death doesn't have the last word. Let's believe it. Let's live as those who know that it's true. In the name of the Father, of the Son, the Holy Spirit.

[18 : 39] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.