

Facing Death

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Preacher: Jon Hueni

[0:00] Well, you do remember back to that first class when we shared together some of the challenges and troubles of growing old. One of them that was mentioned was facing the death of a spouse.

And so that's what we're wanting to deal with this morning. And then we'll move into the last challenge that we'll all face, and that's facing our own death.

So, facing the illness and death of your nearest and dearest on earth, our losses felt so deeply that they leave a scar that we carry to the grave.

Elizabeth Elliott wrote a booklet called Facing the Death of Someone You Love. And you remember this is a lady that lost two husbands, one after another.

The first was murdered by Alka Indians that they were taking the gospel to. The other, slowly consumed by cancer. And she writes, Accepting the death of a loved one and then going beyond that to a resurrection of thanksgiving and joy is perhaps the most difficult task a Christian ever faces.

[1:23] Now, I haven't faced that task, but this woman has. And perhaps some of you who have can acknowledge that what she's saying is true, but she's saying that in her Christian journey, one of the most difficult trials that she's ever had in life was facing the death of her spouse.

And again, the unique thing is that this difficulty hits us when? Usually in our old age. Not always, but usually.

And so again, we're back to that issue that, boy, we're needy in old age. We are in great need of God's grace to continue coming to us right down to the end.

And how we thank God for the promises that he will be with us even unto the end. Oh, Mrs. Elliott gives, I'm not sure what her name is now.

Maybe some of you know she has a radio program, but Elizabeth will call her. Gives six things that helped her through this valley and still help her now. And I just want to go through these six things.

[2:29] Number one, be still and know that he is God. You know the text from Psalm 46, verse 10.

But the context is one of catechismic change and trouble. The psalm opens with the mountains falling into the heart of the sea and the waters of the sea roaring and foaming.

The mountains quaking with their surging. And then, as we said, finally falling in and giving way to the waters that are splashing upon it.

We read of nations in uproar, kingdoms falling, the earth melting. And Elizabeth says, none of these cataclysms seem an exaggeration of what happens when somebody dies.

Namely, a spouse. In other words, these changes, these mountains, the earth shaking, nations and kingdoms, it's pointing to things that you thought would always be there.

[3:39] And now they're gone. Mountains are usually things so stable and unmovable. But now they're shaking. And now they're falling.

And now they're being swallowed up by the sea and they're gone. I was in a coffee shop Tuesday morning meeting with a fellow. And there's a big table of elderly people in there at that hour.

And this morning they were especially grave. And I heard them talking to each other about a dear one that they had lost, a dear friend.

And there was just a hush where usually it's a noisy, chattering table full of older people. It was quiet. And I was struck as they just kind of looked at each other and says, she should be here.

But she's gone. Someone that they expected as if to expect like a mountain would be there.

Because it's there every day of their life. And then suddenly it's gone.

[4:42] That's the context of Psalm 46. Your spouse is gone and you can't envision life without him or her. And the whole world takes on a different look.

But the repeating refrain throughout Psalm 46 is this. But the Lord Almighty is with us. And it's repeated some two or three times, I believe, in the psalm.

And it's meant to be our comfort when we feel like the very earth is moving beneath our feet. And dear ones are no longer with us. God is with us. And so in the midst of our world being turned upside down, we're called to be still.

And to know he is God. To think again that he is with us. To ponder who he is. And this will avoid, help us avoid being at the mercy of our feelings.

Elizabeth says, you need to take yourself by the scruff of your neck. And set aside a definite time and a definite place to look at what God has said. Know that I am God.

[5:50] In other words, she's saying you don't feel like reading your Bible always in the midst of your grief. And that's when you need to take yourself by the neck. Because that's what we need.

We need to be still and consider him. And not cave in to our emotions. It's in the word that we find fundamental bedrock truths that will not move beneath our feet when everything else is changing. We find here an unchanging Lord. Unchanging promises. A rock. So though friends and loved ones die, God ever lives. And he's for me and he's with me.

Nothing looks the same with God in view. And so that's her first point. Secondly, she says give thanks. You don't feel like giving thanks. She says, but there's much to thank God for.

Thank God for his presence in your trial. Thank God for his power, his promises. That he's sovereign over every event of that loss. And that he's faithful and loving.

[6:49] In everything, give thanks. And even in this, give thanks that he aims to demonstrate his all-sufficient grace. That he comes to us in our trials to glorify his name and to do us good.

And then thirdly, refuse self-pity. I know of nothing, she says, more paralyzing, more deadly than self-pity. It's a sinkhole from which no rescuing hand can drag you because you've chosen to sink. She's been in that hole, that sinkhole. And she's calling to us. Refuse self-pity. Dwelling only on our loss.

Looking with envy on others. Asking why me? Poor me. As if I deserve better. Be merciless towards self-pity. Fourth, accept my loneliness as a call to draw closer to God.

She says, when God takes a loved person from my life, it's in order to call me in a new way to himself. A call to greater intimacy and friendship and fellowship with the Lord Jesus.

[7:58] Remembering that there's no good in the creature, but may be found in him. And so when the created streams are dry, we drink directly from the fountain. And then fourth, offer your loneliness to God.

Just like the little boy offered his lunch to Jesus, and Jesus took that little lunch and broke it and blessed people through it. Offer your loneliness to the Lord who can turn it into blessing for you and others.

And lastly, do something for somebody else. Nothing like action in the service of others to overcome the inertia of grief, she says.

It's an old piece of wisdom to do the next thing. What's the next thing in front of you? What's the next thing on the calendar, on the schedule? Do it. Just get on. And serving others.

Not only praying for strength to survive, but some to give away as well. And putting yourself, pouring yourself out for others.

[9:02] So these are some of the counsels that Elizabeth Elliot gives for the loss of a spouse. A few miscellaneous counsels.

A wise man once told a group of ministers as we were gathered together at a fraternal that we should never resign after midnight or on a Monday. Why do you suppose that is?

Never resign after midnight or on a Monday. All right. You're not at your best thinking in that condition.

Mondays can look pretty gloom after a Sunday of labor and midnight. Yeah, I don't survive well after that either.

So never resign after midnight on a Monday. So it is with the bereaved. A few weeks after the funeral when reality sinks in a bit more and you're very down, thinking you'll never enjoy life again.

[10:02] That is not the time to make important decisions, such as whether to sell the house and where to move and all of that. Decisions like that should be made at a time when you're in a better thinking frame.

So give yourself time to get your feet under yourself. And I've not resigned on a Monday or midnight or on a Tuesday, I guess, since then.

But it was sound advice, and I offer it to you as well. I think it's sound in terms of when we're in deep grief as well. What other thoughts, comments, helps do you have?

Some of you have been through this dark valley. Any thoughts? Yes. I see Mike there.

Good. That's an excellent point. We need fellowship. We shouldn't just hole up into our room and stay by ourself in our grief. The idea of fellowship with others that we might draw comforts and encouragements from each other.

[11:12] Yes, Lou Anne. Good. Good. That's also just sound counsel for every couple that we discuss.

What do you want me to do with you if you get into such and such a state? Or what should you do with me if I get a living will and those things?

That's helpful. It takes a lot of pressure off of the person in that situation if you have already spoken to each other about these things. And making a will and laying out the finances and the insurance and all the business dealings so that one is not left with a huge mountain of things suddenly to learn at a very difficult time in life.

That's excellent. Well, Lou Anne is absolutely right. As we transition then into our next point, if statistics hold true, most of you ladies will outlive your man some five years.

And so this trial of losing a spouse will more likely be yours, ladies, than it will be your husband's.

It's one area where men have lost their manners on the idea of ladies first.

[12:28] We just cut out and leave our wives behind. That's the way statistics go. So most men will not have to know the bewilderment of having lost a spouse.

But we all will have to face the last trial of growing old. And husbands probably before the wife. And it's facing our own death.

Facing our own death. Dying. It's no small thing to face this last enemy death. Dying is one of the greatest challenges any of us will ever face. And again, most of us face it in our old age.

Now, there's a general dislike for thinking and talking about death, our own death. Once a king reigned who said if anybody spoke about death in his presence, they would experience it immediately.

What does that reveal? Why is that so that men are squeamish about talking about death? Why? They're afraid of it.

[13:34] And why? I'm sorry? Okay, it's the unknown. Never done that before.

Never stepped across that threshold. Jim? Okay? Again, it's unknown territory. We're stepping into this dark chasm, as it were.

I'm going to put that in abbreviations there. Has anybody ever come back and told us what's there? I think our Lord Jesus has. But you're right.

As far as anybody in our lifetime, mere man who's crossed over and come back. So, the unknown makes it fearful. What else makes it fearful?

There? Okay. So, there's the concern for those that we leave behind. It is unpleasant. And why is that?

[14:35] All right? The separation is unpleasant. It's unnatural, isn't it, for one thing? Death is not natural to us. We were made body-soul creatures, and we were meant to be like that.

And it's sin that has caused this separation of body and soul, this tearing apart, this separation. And that's, it is unpleasant because it's unnatural. And then there's the separation from loved ones.

Somebody else here? Very good. In several of these remarks, what lies behind, beyond death for the Christian is no small part of the answer.

And thinking about what lies beyond. And what Ed was saying is that the new earth helps us to relate to what lies beyond. And thinking about being with the Lord and what awaits us in heaven. So, that would help us. I think for the king, his violent reaction against any talk about death demonstrates his unpreparedness for it.

[15:39] And I think that often is the case. Why people are so squeamish to talk about death is that they are totally unprepared for this event. It has eternal consequences.

It brings us to judgment, after all, doesn't it? After all, it's part of the curse. Because that's why we die. And we go to stand before our maker and to stand under his judgment.

And for him to tell us whether we go to heaven or to hell. And that is forever. That's a big event. The condition coming from the judgment seat is fixed forever.

As someone says, as the tree falls, it lies. And if you die in Christ, you'll be forever in Christ. And if you die outside of Christ, you'll be forever outside of Christ.

So, for many reasons, both death and dying are great challenges and often are met with fear, especially in unbelievers.

[16 : 42] And we're going to see what God has done for the believer to remove our fears. Joshua is an old man about to die. And he gathers the Israelites together to give his last words.

And he introduces his last words in this way. Now, I am about to go the way of all the earth. Isn't that a quaint way to put it? I'm about to go the way of all the earth.

Years later, David would call Solomon, his son, to himself at the end of his life and would say the same thing.

I am about to go the way of all the earth. The way of all the earth. Death is a way. Death is a path. It's the only path out of this world. And all the earth must tread it.

Matthew Henry comments on this verse. This verse to die is to go on a journey. It's a way. A journey to our long home.

[17 : 40] It is the way of all the earth. The way that all mankind must go sooner or later on end quote. Now, what do we do at journeys? We prepare for them, don't we?

Should we not prepare for one of such momentous consequence as death? We're about to launch into eternity. This grand journey. So death is something we ought to prepare for.

It's not morbid to think about it, to plan for it, to prepare for it. Rather, it's foolish not to do so. Our aim should be to be so prepared for death that when it comes our time to die, we have nothing to do but die.

That's what we aim for. To so live every day in a state of preparedness that when our time comes, there's no rushing and scurrying about to do a bunch of stuff.

No, we have nothing to do but die. That's preparedness. That's the kind of preparedness that we ought to aim for, like the patriarch Jacob, who just pulled his feet into his bed and died.

[18 : 46] Genesis 49, 33, when Jacob had called his sons together and when he had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

Isn't that a good way to go? He was ready to die. He pulled his feet up, breathed his last and he was gone. Now, how do we then prepare for death?

Well, right at the top is to make your calling and election sure. 1 Peter 1, verses 10 and 11.

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[20 : 33] He's taken me to himself, not casting me out of his presence. So be sure the marks of the new birth are on you, the marks of the Christian. You can go to 1 John to see those marks laid out in that little letter.

Be sure you're in Christ through repentance and faith. This is huge because in Christ you'll never be outside of Christ. And if you're in Christ, then at death you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom.

Turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 3. 1 Corinthians 3.

Remember, the Corinthians were quarreling and arguing with each other. One was saying, we're the Paul party. We're the Apollos party.

We're the Cephas party. And someone tried to trump them all and say, well, we follow Christ. And so there's this bickering and quarreling. And Paul is writing to put an end to all of that.

[21 : 42] And just to say, you know, the one thing that matters is that we're in Christ. Be sure of that. And here in verses 21 and 22.

So then no more boasting about men. All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas. So in other words, you don't have to choose one and say, I'm of Paul or I'm of Apollos.

They're all yours. You have Paul, you can claim him as your brother and your teacher and Apollos and Cephas. They're all yours. But not just these men. All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future.

All are yours and you are of Christ and Christ is of God. So it's a rather peculiar statement. Death is yours if you're in Christ. It belongs to you.

William Bridge, in a word to the aged, asks, who's afraid of what is his own? You know what a mastiff is? My brother Stan had one of those, a huge dog with a head like a cow and drools all over. [22 : 53] He's going to talk about a mastiff. Who's afraid of what is his own? The child is not afraid of the great mastiff, but puts his hands into the dog's mouth. If you ask him why, well, he'll tell you, for he is our own dog.

Now, if a man is in Christ, this great mastiff death is his own. And therefore, why should he be afraid? Yea, why should he not be willing to die?

Was Elijah unwilling to go into the fiery chariot? Though it is a hard and a sore sickness that you must ride on, yet if it carries you home to your father, why should you be unwilling to die?

So, if you're in Christ, death is yours. So make sure you're in Christ. That's the first point. Make your calling and election sure. Because if you're in Christ, then nothing can ever separate you from God's love.

That's the Romans 8 passage. Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Well, if you're in Christ, nothing can separate you and ever bring you out of Christ.

[23 : 55] And among the things that he mentions, for I am convinced that neither death nor life or anything else will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Physical death is a separation of body and soul. It's a separation from our loved ones, at least for a while, if they're in Christ. It's a separation from this earthly life.

And again, at least for a while, as we look for a new earth as well as a new heaven. But this death cannot separate you from Jesus Christ, from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So, Bridge says, why should you be unwilling to die? That's the first preparation for death. Be sure you are in Christ. If so, all is well with you and death.

Secondly, live a life of repentance and faith today. Today. Someone said life is just long enough to prepare for death. In other words, all of life is to be preparation for dying.

[25 : 05] We should be doing it today. We should be preparing to die today. And it means living before God, keeping short accounts with God. Confessing and repenting of sin at once.

We're shortly to see the Lord, to give an account of him, of the way that we've lived. And let us renew our repentance. Again, Bridge, a Puritan, the Puritan in his word to the aged says, when leaves are off the tree, we see the nests.

You get his picture? And so he says in old age, the leaves are gone and we often see the nests of sin in our hearts that we did not see before. So what do we do when we see our sins?

Well, we run off to Jesus and confess them and repent of them. Are older people ever troubled about the sins of their youth?

What do you do with that? Well, you confess them to God. Listen to David. Psalm 25, 7. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways.

[26 : 19] According to your love, remember me, for you are good, O Lord. Don't remember my sins of my youth against me, but rather remember your love when you think of me.

That's what we do with our sins of our youth. Bridge lists as one of the sins of old age that when we get too old to engage in some of the delights of the flesh and delights of sin, we can be tempted to revert back and remember our delight in our sins of youth and to take delight in that, just in the memory of it.

And Bridget said, no, no, with David, rather pray and confess those sins of youth to God. We've got to be ready to deal with regrets at the end of our life as we're facing our deathbed.

Archibald Alexander, the Princeton professor, said, But the bitterest of all reflections to the aged is that of sins committed, duties omitted, time wasted, opportunities of doing good neglected.

Reflections of this kind and at certain times become insufferably painful. Remember, it was that godly bishop James Usher of Ireland who confessed on his own deathbed, said, Oh, Lord, forgive me, especially my sins of omission, my sins of omission.

[27 : 53] It's testament to the fact that in old age we can begin to think back on our life with regrets for what I did do and I didn't do. What do we do with that? Well, we live a life of repentance and confession today.

We might think that we would live differently if we had it all over to live again. But let us ask ourselves whether we now avail ourselves of all the advantages of our situation to do good.

In other words, what are we doing with the opportunities of today? That's all part of preparing for that time that we not look back with regrets upon what I did today, but rather bless God for his grace

to me.

We cannot atone for the sins, for our sins of the past by tears of penitence. No, for this we must have recourse to another fountain, even the blood of Christ, which cleanses from all unrighteousness.

So if we're going to prepare for death, we need to be living a life of repentance and faith today, laying hold of the time remaining and the opportunities before us.

[29:01] Because a few years ago on Wednesday night, we went through a little booklet, a little book by a French minister, Aldo F. Minot, the regrets of a dying man.

And he was struck down, thought he was dying, called his congregation into his deathbed, and week after week he gave an address from his deathbed.

And there were, I think, five weeks in a row where he challenged them with regrets of a dying man. The Lord restored his strength, and he was able to go on with life and address some of those things in his life.

But this is part of how we prepare for death, how we deal with our sins of youth, regrets of our life, and lay hold of the present.

Balaam had a wish. Remember, he was the prophet for hire. The Moabite king, Balak, hired to curse the Israelites. And every time he opened his mouth to curse them, God filled his mouth with blessing.

[30:10] And he saw, he would take him to a place where he could see part of Israel, down in the valley. And he saw them, and he saw the blessedness of this people, and he envied them.

And this was his wish. Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs. There's a man ready to curse them for money. And out of his mouth pours this envious wish.

Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like theirs. What's their end? Everlasting life. Evidently, he knew that, that these have a good end.

And evidently, he also knew something of their comfort, and lack of fear, and in death, in the face of death. Let me die the death of the righteous. John Wesley saw the Moravian women and children demonstrating confident trust in the presence of the threat of losing their lives as they were on a ship, going from the colony of Georgia back to Great Britain.

And a terrible storm came up, and Wesley saw these Moravian women and children with such lack of fear in the face of death.

[31:29] You know what he concluded? I'm not a believer. And he had been a missionary to Georgia. But he realized, I don't have the root of the matter in me.

And so it wasn't long after that that we read of his conversion. Here's Balaam. Let me die the death of the righteous. Oh, but he wasn't willing to live the life of the righteous, was he?

The righteous life of faith and repentance. So how do we prepare for death? Well, we make sure we're in Christ, and then we live every day unto him.

So that should death come calling today, I have nothing else to do but die. I don't put off for tomorrow what I should be doing today. I do today what is my duty and what is my responsibility, and I'm ready to go.

Well, those are the first two. We have several others that we'll finish up with next week, and especially see next week what it is that the Lord has done to remove this fear from us that we spoke of.

[32:46] Let's pray together as we conclude. Lord, when we think of death, we see what an awesome thing it is, and we're thankful that you haven't been silent about it.

We haven't experienced it. It is something unknown in a certain sense, and yet you've written about it. You've told us what lies on the other side. And Lord Jesus, you've gone through it.

You've tasted death for us, and you've come through it and told us what death is like for the believer. So give us believing hearts.

Prepare us for that great change that is to come upon us. Make each one of us to know that assurance that Christ is ours and we are his.

And then help us today to be ready, whether we should go to you or you should come for us. Thank you for all you've done for us in Christ to make us ready for this day.

[33:49] We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.