

Keeping the Heart in a Season of Sickness

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Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 00] So, today we continue our study of John Flavel's book, Keeping the Heart. And once again, I'll cite Proverbs 423, which is the premise of Flavel's book.

It says, keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. In other words, be careful to guard your heart at all times, because everything we think, do, and say flows from the heart.

It's one thing to go through the motions of something, it's quite another to do so with sincerity and integrity, which requires that it come from the heart.

And on the flip side of that, if we don't guard our hearts, well, Jesus put it this way, for from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness, all these things come from within, and they defile a person.

So, that's the premise of Flavel's book. Then he takes us through various seasons of life where we need to be especially diligent in guarding our hearts. And though it feels a bit like cheating, I'll let Flavel introduce the subject himself today.

[1 : 24] I want to read part of his introduction to this chapter because it's beautifully expressed. Here's what he says. Another season that requires us to diligently search our hearts and keep them with the greatest care is a time of sickness.

When a child of God draws close to eternity, when there are only a few grains of sand left to fall from the upper part of the hourglass, then Satan busily engages himself.

You may say of Satan, what is said of the natural serpent, he has never seen at his full length until dying. And since he cannot win the soul from God, his great design now is to discourage the soul and make it unwilling to go to God.

But the gracious soul with Jacob should then rouse itself upon its deathbed and rejoice that the marriage day of the Lamb is almost here. You should say with dying, Austin, I despise life to be with Christ.

Or consider my Elias, who when asked if he were willing to die, replied, oh, the one who is unwilling to die is the one who is unwilling to go to Christ. And yet how often, indeed too often, do we see the people of God shrinking from death and reluctant to depart.

[2 : 49] How loathe are some to take death by the cold hand. If we were indulged with the freedom to not be dissolved until we dissolved ourselves, when would we say with Paul, my desire is to depart and be with Christ?

Therefore, the last question is, in times of sickness, how can we get our hearts freed from all earthly engagements and persuade them into a willingness to die?

And at such a time as this, there are seven arguments that I will urge upon the people of God to make them cheerfully entertain the messengers of death, to die as well as live like saints.

Now, before we look at these seven arguments, as you likely detected, Flavel's primary consideration in this chapter is sickness that will likely lead to death.

He's talking about when our physical strength fades, when the pain just won't go away, and there's nothing left for the doctors to do. In fact, there's nothing left for anyone to do.

[3 : 58] All we have left is waiting. Waiting to die. Obviously, that's a challenging season of life for many reasons.

That's when we're stripped of virtually everything. That's when our hearts are most exposed. The suffering, not to mention the prospect of death, invites some of our greatest fears.

Regrets begin to surface. And as Flavel points out, this is an opportune time for Satan to strike.

What did he say? When a child of God draws close to eternity, when there are only a few grains of

sand left to fall from the upper part of the hourglass, then Satan busily engages himself. In case you thought otherwise, Satan doesn't fight fair. He waits until we're weak. He waits until our minds are clouded with medicine and anxiety.

He waits until we can't sleep and can only barely tolerate the pain we're in. That's when he shows up and he begins whispering lies into our souls. That's when he comes along to stir up fears within us.

[5 : 11] And what does he say? Oh, this is the end. Do you realize how final this is? Perhaps he says there's nothing more after this.

Or to the believer, he says, are you sure you'll make it to heaven? Ultimately, he wants to terrify us into clinging to this world for dear life.

Why? Well, Jesus said of his disciples, I give them eternal life and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of my hand. I believe the devil knows he cannot steal us away from God the Father and Christ the Son, but he can make us scared to go home.

Or scared that we won't make it home. I know that sounds absurd. Why would a Christian fear going to heaven? Well, it can be hard to see heaven when you're standing so close to death.

I love John Bunyan's illustration in *The Pilgrim's Progress* when Christian attempts to cross the river of death. On the one hand, he's so close to the celestial city.

[6 : 25] It's right there. It's just on the other side of the river. But on the other hand, he has kind of a Peter moment. When Peter walked on the water, he got distracted by the water itself and became very fearful and thought, I can't make it.

And in *Pilgrim's Progress*, the same thing happens. Here's what Bunyan writes. Then Christian looked over his shoulder and the river seemed to be very narrow at the top.

But as he was carried further down, the sides appeared to be very broad and the bottom very deep. And the water ran cold into his knees, then into his waist. And then he went down and down until he was beneath the surface of the water.

But as he was sinking, one called to him, courage, dear Christian, you shall have light and peace and life at the end of the journey. In that moment, he felt a ray of light upon his face and his feet began to move.

So with much ado, he gained the opposite bank. And that's precisely why we need to guard our hearts in sickness.

[7 : 32] Death itself distracts us. And a distracted Christian becomes a sinking Christian in many respects. Now, one more thing to consider before we look at Flavel's seven arguments.

I realize most of us are not dying. Not presently, not actively. So we may wonder whether this subject has any immediate relevance. And I would argue, yes, it does.

Whether you're currently sick or maybe caring for someone who is or simply preparing yourself for the day when that affliction comes, you can begin equipping yourself even now.

We need lessons like this. Not just to die well, but to live well until that day comes. So let's consider Flavel's seven arguments.

These are seven biblical lessons that will help us guard our hearts in times of sickness and dying. Number one, death is harmless.

[8 : 38] Death is harmless. Now, we need to be clear about a couple of things here. First, when I say death is harmless, I do not mean death is good or even natural according to God's original design.

Death is a consequence of sin. God told the first man, Adam, for in the day that you eat of that forbidden fruit, you shall surely die.

Romans 5.12, just as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. Death is often described in the Bible as an enemy, specifically an enemy of God.

This is the language Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15, that great resurrection chapter of the Bible. He says, the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

And I point this out because I often hear Christians talk as though death is nothing. It's no big deal. I've heard Christian ministers stand at a funeral and tell a family, you shouldn't be weeping.

[9 : 51] Death is nothing to the believer. Well, yes and no. On the one hand, death is ultimately harmless to the believer, which we'll talk about.

On the other hand, death is always tragic. It's the result of sin. It's part of God's judgment that destroys our bodies and it rips families apart.

It's an enemy that Christ came to defeat. And furthermore, Jesus himself wept at the funeral of his friend Lazarus.

Never does the Bible say, don't weep, death is nothing. Don't worry about it. No, it actually says, grieve. Yes, grieve, but with hope.

And I think that's a helpful distinction to make. Second, when I say death is harmless, I am referring very specifically to believers.

[10:56] This is not a universal principle for all people. In fact, for the unbeliever, not united to Christ, there should be nothing more terrifying than death.

It is appointed for man to die once, we're told. And after that comes judgment. But for the believer, the rest of the verse says, So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

So, only for the believer is death harmless. Here's what Flavel says. Though death keeps its dart, it has lost its sting.

A saint may play over the hole of the cobra and put his hand on the adder's den. Isaiah 11.8 Death is the adder, or cobra, and grace is his hole, or den.

Saints do not need to fear to put their hand boldly into it. It has left and lost its sting in the sight of Christ. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?

[12:10] 1 Corinthians 15.55 I love that verse from 1 Corinthians 15. Citing Hosea 13.14, Paul is essentially taunting death.

And that's a pretty bold thing to do. I mean, death is this looming, inevitable thing that quite naturally makes us feel so helpless, so powerless.

Of course, it also feels so final, doesn't it? There's no going back from death. And yet, here's Paul taunting it.

O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? Death, do what you will with my body. You will not defeat me.

Your sting has no effect on me. Imagine facing down a wild animal. A big animal. Something with the power to rip you to shreds.

[13:07] What would you do? Well, you probably wouldn't taunt it. Maybe you'd grab something to defend yourself. Maybe you'd try to run, but taunt it?

You wouldn't taunt it unless you knew you were safe from it. If it were, say, locked in a cage, sure, you might be bold enough to do a little mocking and jabbing then, but that's exactly what Paul knows about death regarding the believer.

If death were a snake, I guess you could say it can still bite, but the sting is gone. The venom has been drained. Paul writes, the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And I love Flavel's reference to Isaiah 11. After Isaiah prophesies the coming of Christ, he begins to describe what victory in Christ will look like in the end.

And here's what he says, the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall be. The wolf shall lie down with the young goat and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together and a little child shall lead them.

[14:21] The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain. For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That's perfect peace, which could not be possible for sinners like us apart from the sinless life and atoning death of Jesus Christ our Lord.

But more to the point, the Lord's death takes the sting out of our deaths. Yes, we still die, but we do not die in our sins.

When Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1 speaks of the coming judgment of Christ, he says in verses 8 and 9, he will inflict vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. Jesus told the story of a rich man dying only to find himself in Hades being in

torment.

[15 : 55] So yes, the believer still dies. We still suffer the pains of our frail dying bodies, but Christ has eliminated the real dangers. In fact, the Bible speaks of a believer's death as little more than falling asleep.

There's no punishment to follow. There's no loss. Paul says, Philippians 1.20, I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage, now as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Thanks to Christ, not only have the dangers of death been removed, but death now becomes an advantage for believers.

We gain by dying. So death is ultimately harmless. Number two, death is necessary.

Death is necessary. Flavel writes, To keep your heart from shrinking back at such a time as this, consider the necessity of death for the full fruition of God's plan.

[17 : 17] Whether you are willing to die or not, I assure you that there is no other way to obtain the full satisfaction of your soul or to complete its happiness. Until the hand of death does you the kind favor of drawing aside the curtain of the flesh, your soul cannot see God.

This physical life stands between you and Him. In short, we need to die. Think about it.

As it stands, we live in a fallen, sinful world, in fallen, sinful flesh. In other words, we're not fit to enjoy, to stand in the full presence of God.

There is something that stands between us and Him. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says, For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

You see, in Paul's day, a mirror was this polished piece of bronze. Yes, you could see your reflection, but it certainly wasn't clear. And the contrast he makes is to show that we're currently limited in a way that we won't be later on.

[18 : 29] He puts it even more succinctly in 2 Corinthians 5 when he says, We know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord.

For we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are a good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

There is necessarily distance between sinners and our holy God.

So the only way to come face to face is to cast off these sinful bodies. In other words, we must die first. Our bodies must die first.

As Flavel says, Your body must be refined and cast into a new mold. Otherwise, the new wine of heavenly glory would break it.

[19 : 27] Flavel then goes on to quote just a portion of 2 Corinthians 12. That's where Paul describes a man, quite possibly himself, who was caught up to the third heaven.

So beyond the sky, beyond physical space, into heaven itself. Interestingly, Paul isn't quite sure whether this man went to heaven in his body or not.

Twice he says, Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. But then, this man returns from paradise, and Paul says, He heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

Now, Flavel seems to believe this man left his body. Regardless, when he returns, he can't even talk about what he's seen.

The glory revealed to him was so great that evidently no words on earth can describe it. The Lord, He often gives us glimpses of that glory.

[20 : 32] We get these sneak previews, if you will, but the current state of this world and our flesh prohibit us from experiencing the fullness of that glory.

Psalms 16:11 says, In your presence, there is fullness of joy. At your right hand are pleasures forevermore. But there's only one way to reach that fullness of joy and those pleasures forevermore.

As Flavel says, Death must draw aside the curtain of the flesh. Your body must be refined and cast into a new mold. Otherwise, the new wine of heavenly glory would break it.

So death is necessary. Number three, The next life will be superior. I suppose I've alluded to this already, but again, Paul says, To die is gain.

Then two verses later, he writes, My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. He doesn't say slightly better or marginally better.

[21 : 42] He says far better. Elsewhere, he says we can't even compare the two. Romans 8.18, For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

2 Corinthians 4.17, For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

Here's what Flavel says. Another argument to persuade you to this willingness to die is the reality of an immediate succession of a more excellent and glorious life.

It is only a wink and you will see God. Your happiness will not be deferred until the resurrection. As soon as the body is dead, the gracious soul is swallowed up in life.

I like the word he used, immediate. It is only a wink and you will see God. It is only a wink and you will enter into a life far better than anything we can imagine now.

[22 : 55] We can't even compare the two. We can't even talk about heaven in its fullness here in this place. It's impossible. Evidently, we don't have the capacity to even grasp it.

Flavel writes, Oh, what a change a few moments will make upon your condition. Rouse up, dying saint. When your soul has come out a little farther, you will stand like Abraham at the door of your tent and the angels of God will soon be with you.

The souls of the elect are in a sense put out for the angels to nurse and when they die, the angels carry them home again to their father's house. If an angel was caused to fly swiftly to bring a saint, the answer of his prayer, referring to Daniel 9.21, how much more will the angels come quickly from heaven to receive and transfer the praying soul itself?

When we think about dying, we tend to think of it as the end. As Christians, we know better. But we naturally think of it as the end.

It's this final thing. But it's not the end. It's not even the end of our bodies. Eventually, Christ is returning for them too. It's not a backward step.

[24 : 18] It's not even a pause. Death actually moves us forward. It's progress. It's gain for the believer. It's moving us from a grown-filled, imperfect life into something far beyond anything we've ever known.

far better than anything we've ever known. Number four. Death delivers us.

Death delivers us. I've debated whether that's the best way to phrase it, but I think you'll see what I mean by that. Typically, we think of death as something to be endured at best, if not rescued from. Right? But for the believer, death, this terrible consequence of sin, actually becomes God's instrument for delivering us.

Revelation 14, 13 says, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. In Christ, this terrible thing actually becomes a blessing.

[25 : 35] How so? Well, not only does death lead us into a far better place, but it also saves us from a far worse place. You know, I think the most challenging funeral I've ever preached was for the, one of my colleagues' two-year-old grandsons who died in a car accident.

And at the funeral, I told his parents, I want you to think about everything you've ever hoped for for your son. You've obviously hoped for his safety, his well-being, his happiness, and so on.

Well, by God's grace, he now has all of that and more. And he has it forevermore. So as heartbroken as you are right now, you'll never again have to worry about his safety.

You'll never again have to worry about his well-being. You'll never have to worry about his happiness. The Lord has rescued him from everything that is wrong with this world. In other words, death is a mercy for the Christian.

Flavel says, do you know what evil may be coming on the earth that you are so reluctant to leave? Your God removes you for your great advantage.

[26 : 57] You are disbanded by death and called off the field. Other poor saints must stand against it and endure a great fight of afflictions. You see, death doesn't push us out of life.

It pulls us out of danger into a better life. Number five, death is an advantage.

Now, for the sake of time and to avoid some redundancy here, I'll just summarize this point. Flavel encourages us to really consider what we gain by dying.

He says, consider both your communion with God and your communion with saints. He continues, your soul will shortly stand before the face of God whose glory will immediately shine and beam forth upon it.

Here on earth your soul is more remote from God and the beams of His glory strike it only obliquely and feebly. But soon it will be in a direct line and there the sun will stand still as it did in Gibeon. [28 : 08] There will be no cloud nor any diminishing of it. As for the enjoyment of the saints we certainly have fellowship with them here of a lower form but that fellowship is so affected by remaining corruptions that there is no satisfaction in it.

But when death has admitted you into that glorious assembly of the spirits of the righteous made perfect you will have the desire of your heart. Here you cannot fully connect with one another. Oh what discord, arguing, and censoring are here. But what perfect blessed harmony is there. In heaven each saint loves another as himself.

They are altogether lovely. Number six. Death is a comfort. Death is a comfort.

Now I know that sounds like a very strange thing to say. Here we are trying to find comfort in the face of death and Flavel tells us to consider death itself the comfort.

[29 : 20] You know I don't consider myself old but I can't help but notice that I am getting older. I get sore more easily than I used to.

Recovery takes a little bit longer. My hair is thinning. My eyesight gets just a little bit worse every time I visit the optometrist and I know that my body will only deteriorate more and more as I get older.

There could very well come a day when I cannot walk or hear or see. The daily aches and pains will surely increase and when I'm old and feeble what then?

Should I cling to this body that is causing me so much trouble and discomfort? Twice the apostle Paul talks about God's people groaning in this world and in both cases he speaks of being freed from these mortal bodies evidently the source of our groaning or at least part of it.

In 2 Corinthians 5 verses 1 and 2 he says for we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed we have a building from God a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens for in this tent we groan longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.

[30 : 46] Then in Romans 8 he uses very similar language he writes we ourselves who have the first fruits of the spirit groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons which he defines as the redemption of our bodies.

that's verse 23. In other words part of our hope part of our glad anticipation is that we will be rescued from these fallen corrupted bodies.

First we escape these bodies in death to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord. Then when Christ returns he redeems our bodies and he makes them what they were always meant to be.

You may remember Paul's cry in Romans 7 wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death. The Christian who has spent a lifetime warring against his flesh struggling through the aches and pains and diseases that we inevitably face in this broken world.

why would he or she want to cling to such a miserable body? Flavel writes justification has destroyed the damning power of sin and sanctification has defeated its reigning power but glorification destroys its very being and existence.

[32 : 20] He goes on to write here we also groan under temptations but as soon as we are out of the body we are out of the reach of temptation. Later he says here we groan under various troubles and afflictions but there in heaven the days of our mourning are ended.

God will wipe away all tears and dry our eyes. Oh then let us hurry away that we may be at rest. In short we have nothing to lose and everything to gain and when we realize that death itself becomes a comfort because death is the means by which we leave these sinful suffering bodies.

Number seven our arguments to stay are groundless. the arguments we make to stay here are groundless.

With this last point Flavel encourages us to think about why we want to stay. Why are we so unwilling to die? Why do we fight so hard against it?

And maybe we can come up with some seemingly reasonable justifications but maybe we ought to examine them a bit closer. How reasonable are they? In light of everything the Bible tells us.

[33 : 52] For example maybe we're concerned about our family. Maybe we don't want to leave our family behind. If you're the breadwinner perhaps you're concerned about how your family will be provided for.

That seems legitimate. Well listen to what the Lord says through Jeremiah. This is Jeremiah 49 11. Leave your fatherless children.

I will keep them alive. And let your widows trust in me. In his last will and testament Martin Luther wrote these words.

Lord you have given me wife and children. I have nothing to leave them. But I commit them to you. Oh father of the fatherless and judge of widows.

Nourish keep and teach them. we don't need to hang on to life for our family's sake. Just as the Lord provided for them before while we were still here he'll provide for them when we're gone.

[34 : 57] He knows their needs and he knows their needs when he appoints the time of our death. maybe we assume we still have work to do in this world.

Well evidently not. Not if the Lord has called you home. He has other servants. He has other laborers.

Believe it or not the work will continue without us. It never rested on us to begin with. Or maybe we argue that we're not quite ready for heaven.

Perhaps we think I have more growing to do. I'm not nearly sanctified enough for heaven. Well there's some truth to that. But if God has determined it's our time to depart then we are precisely where we need to be.

Furthermore we are already justified by the blood of Jesus Christ through faith and nothing will ever make us more justified. or maybe we're concerned that we don't have enough assurance of salvation to die.

[36 : 10] We think I can't die yet. I want to feel more confident about where I'm going before I die. I remember talking to a woman years ago who had recently suffered from breast cancer and she told me she was terrified throughout the ordeal.

She was scared to death of dying and she said you know I finally realized I didn't have anything to worry about. I can't be dying she told herself because I don't have dying grace.

That's what she called it. her understanding was that every Christian will feel nothing but peace on their death bed. But that isn't necessarily true.

When Isaiah told King Hezekiah he was dying how did Hezekiah respond? Isaiah 38 says he wept bitterly. He didn't feel perfectly at peace about dying.

Here's what Flavel says about it. Consider that a hearty willingness to leave all the world to be freed from sin and be with God is the next step to that desired assurance.

[37 : 30] In other words you don't need a feeling of assurance all you need is trust in the promises of God and a willingness to submit to his sovereign will.

If you're looking for complete perfect assurance well Flavel says trusting is the first step but ultimately you'll find it in the presence of God.

Your assurance is on the other side of the grave. Now there's one more argument I've heard probably more than any others.

Flavel doesn't address it but I will and that is I'm not really afraid of dying I'm afraid of what might kill me. And that seems reasonable enough but let me give you one last thing to consider.

As you think about aging and all that comes with it the frailty the aches and pains potentially suffering from a disease remember that every weakness that develops every ache you feel every physical symptom is carrying you one step closer to having your every hope realized.

[39 : 01] Our dying bodies again are not moving us toward finality they're moving us closer and closer and closer to heaven the dwelling place of God where he will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore.

Amen. Let's pray. Father we thank you that in Christ death has lost its sting.

Forgive us Lord for growing fearful of dying and clinging so tightly to this world but death for the believer is not defeat it's deliverance it's gain so teach us Lord to number our days to keep our hearts with all vigilance and times of sickness and to live in such a way that we are ready to die well when that time comes fix our hope on the day when faith shall become sight and we will see our Savior face to face and it's in his name we pray!

Amen. We're dismissed. Thank you.