

Death's Immediate Sequel for the Believer

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Many of you know that it was eight weeks ago today, August 22nd to be exact, that I stood behind this pulpit and made an attempt to expound and apply that marvelous text in Romans 8 (verse 28): "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." And when I finished that effort at exposition and application, I made the announcement to this congregation that I was beginning what I called an indefinite leave of absence from the public ministry of the Word and from most of my pastoral duties in order to give myself fulltime and without distraction to caring for my dying wife. It had become evident that she was rapidly failing and that my care was needed at an entirely new level.

Then, again, as most of you know, it was four weeks and one day later on September 20th at 6:40 in the morning that I stood by her bedside and watched her breathe her last. Several minutes after her last breath and the subsequent clear indications that she had indeed died, it was my privilege, unspeakable privilege, to cradle her lifeless body in my arms and to hold her up from the bed while my daughter Heidi and my sister Joyce stripped the bed of its soiled linen, put on fresh linen, and then together we tenderly prepared her body for the visit of the Hospice nurse who was on her way to sign the death certificate, and prepared her for the visit of the undertaker who would subsequently come and take her away to prepare her for her funeral.

As best I can recall the timeframe, in the moments between her last breath and my cradling my beloved in my arms while staring death straight in the eye without any ability to avoid the stark reality of the presence of the last enemy, feeling keenly the many profound realities that surround the intrusion of death, I asked myself this question: what happened to my beloved from the time she breathed her last and the moments later when I lifted her from her death bed and cradled her in my arms? And I bless God that as I asked that question and my mind reflected upon passage upon passage, that I can say to the praise of God and to the great joy of my own heart that I knew with unshakable certainty the sequel to her death. I knew what had happened from the time of her last breath to the time of cradling her in my arms.

And this morning I want to preach to you on the things that I knew then and know now, and which if you do not know and which you do not have grounds to expect will be true of you, then you are a fool of all fools, because the hour is coming when that ultimate reality is going to nail you to your deathbed. You may put death out of your mind, out of your thoughts; immerse yourself in present toys or present legitimate responsibilities, but the fact of common observation as well as Biblical affirmation is, it's appointed unto men once to die. And you're going to die like my beloved died. And I'm going to die like she died. So this morning I want to speak on the subject

death and its immediate sequel for the one who dies in union with Christ. And in opening up this subject, I will seek to do so under two major headings. First of all, I want to speak unto you of two foundational facts of Biblical revelation crucial to a right understanding of death itself. We cannot address death and its sequel for the one in Christ unless we understand two foundational facts of Biblical revelation crucial to a right understanding of death itself. And then my second heading is four wonderful realities that constitute the immediate sequel to death for all who die in Christ.

First of all, then, two foundational facts of Biblical revelation crucial to a right understanding to death itself. Fact number one is this: it has to do with the essential nature and constitution of human beings made in the image of God. According to the Scriptures, mankind; that is, men and women, boys and girls made in the image of God are created by God and composed of two distinct entities. Now, you've had no existence apart from those two entities being joined, and in some areas interpenetrating one another by their influence. But nonetheless, the Scriptures are clear that sitting here today and my standing before you today, we are all, in terms of our fundamental and essential nature and constitution, comprised of two distinct entities.

On the one hand, there is that entity we call our bodies: physical, material, corporeal entities, touchable, visible, hurtable, killable. The body, that thing which is plunked in your pew by means of which your eyeballs are able to see me and sound waves strike upon your ear drum and go by the auditory nerve to your brain, and in the case of our deaf folks, by means of the signs our brother Lesley makes, and those things are interpreted into words that register upon this pile of gray matter between our ears called the brain. However, the Bible makes it abundantly clear and everywhere assumes that we have a second entity, an entity the Bible calls our souls or our spirits. And while the Bible everywhere assumes this, there are certain texts which are sheer nonsense if this is not true.

For example, when Jesus is commissioning the twelve to go out on their preaching mission and apprise them that they are going to face opposition, possible even unto martyrdom, He says these very, very significant words in Matthew 10:28: "And fear not them which kill the body [the touchable, corporeal, physical entity], but are not able to kill the soul [the non-material, the non-corporeal entity]: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Those words of our Lord Jesus are sheer nonsense if we are not composed of these two distinct entities.

Or take, for example, Paul's prayer wish in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. This is his prayer wish for the Thessalonian believers: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly [through the entire range of what makes you you]; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Without getting into the discussion of dichotomy and trichotomy, I understand soul and spirit to be interchangeable terms, and the Apostle, as it were, is simply covering the bases to identify the non-corporeal, non-physical entity, the soul and spirit, the physical, the corporeal. And he says, "It is my prayer wish that the entirety of your humanity constituted of the material and the non-material experience the sanctifying and preserving work of the living God." So that's fact number one that we've got to understand if we're to understand what happens to the believer who dies in Christ.

Fact number two has to do with the essence of death in the case of human beings. What is the essence of death in the case of human beings? The experience of death for human beings is basically this: it is the radical separation of these two entities, the soul and the body. For the first time in our existence from our conception in our mother's wombs, these two entities are radically separated the one from the other. In James 2:26, James is going to use this fundamental fact as an illustration of a more profound spiritual reality. He says, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." He assumes that anyone with any form of rationality and any contact with Biblical revelation would understand that the essence of death is the body and the spirit separated.

And the example of our Lord's death in Luke 23:46: "And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, He said, Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit." And the subsequent record is, He breathed His last, and His lifeless body hung upon that cross. He was tenderly taken down by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea and washed and wrapped with wrappings and spices and laid in a tomb. Two distinct entities in the perfect humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Or the case of Stephen, the beautiful account of his death in Acts 7:59-60: "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And when the Lord received his spirit, it says he fell asleep. And the falling asleep is always with reference to what we see in the body of the child of God. He is fallen asleep in union with Jesus.

Now concerning this radical separation of soul and body, two things need to be emphasized, especially in our totally secularized, mechanistic, materialistic age. First of all, it is unnatural and is the result of sin. Death is not a natural part of life with which we simply need to learn to cope as we cope with cutting teeth and losing teeth and getting crowns and false teeth and all the rest. No, the Bible is abundantly clear that death is a wholly unnatural intrusion in human experience, an intrusion which has come as the result of sin. Listen to the very perceptive words of Mr. Veenema in his very excellent book *The Promise of the Future*. He writes,

"Contrary to many modern myths about death, that death is a natural part of life, that it marks the cessation of existence, that there's a natural dignity in dying well, the Bible paints its portrait of death with the most dark and sobering of colors. Nowhere in the Bible is death treated as something natural, as something that can easily be domesticated or treated as 'a part of life.' No encouragement is given us in the Bible to minimize the terror and the fearfulness of death. It is called our last enemy. In 1 Corinthians 15:26, the Biblical understanding of death begins with the fall into sin. Death is the divinely appointed punishment of mankind's disobedience. Genesis 2:17 is part of the stipulation of obedience. Adam was forewarned, 'You must not eat of the knowledge of good and evil. For when you eat of it, you shall surely die.' Adam, formed from the dust of the earth and made a living soul through the inbreathing of his Creator became liable to death through his act of disobedience, a liability which now falls upon all whom he represented as their covenant head."

One of the more prominent passages in Scripture on the subject of sin and death is Romans 5:12-21. And in that passage, sin and death are inseparably linked. And therefore, as we think of the essence of death (the separation of the soul from the body), this unnatural separation of that which constitutes us image bearers of God, we must always remember it is unnatural and the result of sin. And secondly, it is a temporary existence. It is a temporal condition awaiting the reunion of soul and body at the general resurrection, when our blessed Lord with the entourage of the host of

heaven with the voice of the Archangel and the trump of God will come in glory and in power. And the Scripture says that when He does, "all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation." So in summary, if we're to think Biblically regarding death and its relationship to the child of God and what happens as the immediate sequel to the death of one who is in Christ, we will only think Biblically if our thinking rests down upon these two vital elements of Biblical revelation: the essential nature of human beings (we are comprised of two entities) and the essence of death (the separation of those two entities that is both unnatural and only temporal).

But now we come to what is the heart of the message this morning: four wonderful realities that constitute the immediate sequel for one who dies in union with Christ. Now let me explain a couple of words I'm using. I've used the term "the immediate sequel." While the body is still warm, as was my beloved's when I held it in my arms, and while there is still some color upon the cheek, what has happened when the soul of that one has left that body and they have died? What are the immediate sequels to that experience? In other words, I'm addressing this morning what the theologians call the intermediate state, not the consummate state at the return of Christ, when the dead in Christ shall rise first; living saints will be transformed in a moment in an instant, and together caught up together in the clouds to be forever with the Lord. I'm speaking of the intermediate state. And while the great focus of Scripture is upon the consummate state of redemptive grace (what the believers receive at the coming of Christ and the resurrection of their bodies), that is what is called the Christian's hope. Whenever you read about the believer's hope in the Bible, it is not focused on the intermediate state. He has great confidence; he can have great joy; he can face the last enemy in faith and not be terrified. But that's never call the believer's hope. The believer's hope is what he receives at the return of Christ and the full possession of all that was purchased for him by our Lord Jesus Christ.

However, we do have from the Scripture sufficient data that we may, if we are privileged to do so, cradle a loved one in our arms and know exactly what has happened from the time they breathed their last and before the undertaker comes. So that's why I'm using the term "What is the immediate sequel to death for the one who in Christ?" Why do I use that terminology? Well, for the simple reason that the only one for whom death is a blessing is the one who's in Christ. Revelation 14:13 says, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth." Those that sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. In other words, I could use the term "for Christians," "for believers," but those terms have become so weakened and so neutralized in much of their Biblical vigor. I want to use what is the central phrase concerning New Testament salvation: union with Christ--"They die in the Lord." "If any man be in Christ.... We have been blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ.... But of Him are you in Christ who has made of us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption...etc." That's why I'm using that terminology. Now with an understanding of that terminology, what are the four wonderful realities that constitute the immediate sequel to the death of one who is in Christ?

Number one: the one who dies in Christ is in the full consciousness of his existence immediately made perfect in moral likeness to Christ. And I'm going to use the masculine pronoun so I don't have to keep saying his or her, but I'm referring to my wife. Miss Reynolds is still with me, so you'll just have to forgive me. (That's an in house statement.) According to Romans 8:29, the great goal of God in redemptive

grace is nothing less than the restoration of His moral image after the pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ. "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom he called, them He also justified: and whom he justified, them He also glorified." And what is it to be glorified? It is to experience total conformity to the moral likeness of Christ in body and soul at the consummation of redemptive grace. As J. I. Packer stated it so simply and beautifully, "It will be sinless souls inhabiting deathless bodies."

That's it! But for most of us, we're going to get in two stages. Those alive at the return of the Lord are going to get the whole shebang just like that in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, we're going to be transformed soul and body. But what about my beloved? What's happened to her? What's happened to your loved ones in Christ? The moment they breathed their last and that unnatural, an albeit temporal severance of soul and body occurs, the Scriptures tell us that the one who dies in Christ is in the full consciousness of his existence immediately made perfect into the moral likeness of Christ. How do we know that? Look at Hebrews 12:22-23. The writer to the Hebrews is enumerating all of the wonderful realities to which we come in new covenant blessing. He's contrasted what they came to in the circumstantial surroundings of the old covenant. Now the contrast:

"But ye are come [something has happened, the results of which continue into the present. 'You are come,' not 'You shall come.' You have already come and remain] unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect."

Here's a perfect passive participle: the spirits of just men having been and remaining in a state of perfection. Now how did they get that? The moment their spirits left their bodies, God, in His grace, puts forth a concentrated degree of the divine energy of sanctifying grace that accomplishes more in a millisecond than we have known of progressive sanctification through a whole lifetime. I tell you, that gets me shouting happy.

What did God do with my beloved? What did He do with every one of you who is a Christian? As a 19-year-old in nurses training, God brought her into contact with some Christians. And they witnessed to her and opened up the Scriptures. And little bits of seeds that had been sown along her past, God caused them to germinate and to spring forth into new life in union with Jesus Christ. And when I met her, she was in the flush of her fresh love to Christ, and was I. Nothing mattered but singing about Him and going out in the street and passing out tracts and talking about Him and praying and reading the Bible.

It was evident that God had put forth the energy of divine grace called regeneration. He had taken out the heart of stone and given a heart of flesh; made Christ the pearl of great price; implanted a passion to be holy and to be like Christ. And I was privileged to track that initial work flowering out into progressive sanctification for over 52 years. Marvelous changes--God dealing with this attitude and this disposition and this perspective and that and the other, so that as the tributes were given here from this very pulpit at her memorial service, all who knew her saw her ripening for glory.

But my friends, everything God did from age 19 to age 73 could be put in a thimble full, and God gave her the ocean the moment she breathed her last. She joined the company of just men made perfect. Never again to have to feel the twinge of grief for an envious thought, a prideful thought, an angry thought, an irritated thought, an unkind thought. Utterly rid of anything that would be the fuel of repentance. On the positive side, fully endowed with every grace that will make the soul reflective of the moral perfections of Christ. Capable of growth? Capable of development? Yes, but as to its moral constitution, it is "the spirits of just men made perfect." Mind, affections, and will fully, unreservedly conformed to the highest standard of the law of God in all of its breadth and depth and in all of its penetrating demands.

I could not help but think when reflecting on this early this morning: what happened to Isaiah when he had but a vision while still in this life of the glory of God's burning holiness? Cherubim, those strange creatures that reflect the moral perfections of God. And he sees God enthroned, and John 12 says it was the glory of the pre-incarnate Christ that he saw when he sees God in His burning holiness. What does Isaiah do? He doesn't dance for joy. He's undone; he falls prostrate and says, "O God, I've had it! I'm shattered! I'm undone!" I find great comfort to think the moment my beloved breathed her last and her spirit was ushered into that same throne room Isaiah saw in vision, she was released with nothing but unbounded joy--at home, fully at home, psychologically, spiritually, morally in every way with an utterly holy God and not a twinge of discomfort.

And my friend, I've got news for you. That's what Gods' going to do for you the moment you breathe your last. If you're in Christ, that's what He's committed to do--to make you join the company of just men made perfect. And I have found as I've been trying to shape into little maxims how to handle the deep and crushing grief of my loss, this is one that helps me: I say to myself, "Albert, think more of what she has gained than of what you have lost. She's gained what is the passionate desire of every true believer. If you can dig down through to get to the real stuff that makes us what we are, in every true believer, the deepest subterranean passion is to be done with sin and to be wholly like Jesus. And my friend, you're going to get it the moment you breath your last.

But then secondly, here's the immediate sequel to the death of one in Christ: the one who dies in Christ is in the full consciousness of his existence immediately brought into the presence of Christ. And here are two passages (you ought to know them; I hope you thinking about them): 2 Corinthians and Philippians 1.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul has reflected upon his sufferings and at the end of chapter calls them light afflictions that are working a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. And then he says, "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." He likens his glorified body to a permanent dwelling, not this tattered tent that he has down here. And he says, "To be honest, I'd rather not be untented; I'd rather not have my soul be in a state of nakedness, a disembodied spirit. But I'd like this shredded tent to be swallowed up immediately with this eternal dwelling." But he says, "On the other hand, though that would be my desire, I'm confident of something." Look at verses 6 to 8: "Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (for we walk by faith, not by sight:) we are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." Words could not be clearer. Paul says, "I've got two

possible modes of existence. If I stay around in my shredded tent, I'm away from the Lord." Now remember, this is a man who was caught up in the third heaven and heard things it was not lawful to speak or write, one who had deep, intimate, passionate communion and fellowship with Christ. Yet he says, "As long as I'm in this body, there's a fundamental sense in which I am absent from the Lord." He's there wherever the glorified body of Jesus is. Sometime I'll talk to you about some things I've been thinking about along those lines--I'm not ready to preach about them. He says, "As long as I'm here in this tent, I'm not there. If I'm at home in the body, I'm absent from the Lord. However, if I leave this tent, where do I go? I'm at home with the Lord." And he says, "We are willing rather (this is the desire of our hearts) to be at home with Him." That's the text printed on all the materials in conjunction with my wife's home going.

And then, of course, the second passage, Philippians 1, where the Apostle speaks of this internal struggle within his own soul. He says in verses 21 to 24: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you." Words could not be more clear. He says there is this yearning to experience that which is very far better, and that is to depart and to be with Christ, not to go into some state of soul sleep, a kind of permanent anesthesia till the day of resurrection as the Jehovah witnesses and the 7th Day Adventists teach. No, this man who knew intimate communion with Christ could never desire a state where that communion was cut off, but only where it would be augmented to entirely new degrees and heights and depths of blessed reality. "I desire to depart and to be with Christ. That's the gain that death will bring for me. To live is Christ, and why is death gain? Because I get more of Christ in death than I could ever have of Him in life." Remember, this is the man who said, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

Child of God, what can you know about the immediate sequel to your death and the death of loved ones who die in Christ? You can know from the Scriptures that their death is their gain, and their gain is ravishing face to face communion with the One who has captured their hearts, won their affections, and forever fastened all that they are to Himself in bonds of deepest love--to die is gain.

The moment the soul leaves the body, the prayer of Jesus is partially answered, not fully. John 17. In this that is commonly called the high priestly prayer of our Lord, at the end of the prayer, He uses a verb for the first time. All the other requests are used in the form of petitionary prayer. But here He exerts regal will: "Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am; that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me: for Thou lovedst Me before the foundation of the world" (v. 24). Jesus knows that the fullness of our joy awaits the fullness of His joy. And what's the fullness of His joy? It's seeing our joy made full in the face-to-face beholding of His glory. And so as Spurgeon in His inimitable way in *Morning and Evening* has a devotional on this text, he says, "Ah believer, you would keep them with you, but your Savior would have them with Him." And then he draws that out as only Spurgeon does, and he says, "Now I ask you, dear believer, whose will will win the day?"

And what a comfort it's been when I feel the crushing loneliness to say, "Lord Jesus, You want her so much, You couldn't stand for her not to behold Your glory. And Lord

Jesus, You died for her. I would die for her in my love, but You did die for her. You purchased her. You had every right to say, 'I can't stand having her behold my glory through a vale and darkly. I want her joy full by seeing Me face to face.'" How in the world can I complain at a Savior like that? How could I profess to love her and want to keep her from beholding His glory as He is at the right hand of the Father?

But I said it's only partially answered, because until she and I and all of us in Christ look at His glory, which is the glory of the God-man in heaven, and we look at it with glorified eyeballs that register His glorified physical form upon our retinas, the glory is still not fully revealed. So she's got more to come. But she's gotten so much, and I envy her. But I bless God, we're both going to have it all.

In the immediate sequel to death, that's what happens to the believer's soul. It immediately passes into the presence of Christ. And these are the words that gripped me shortly after her death as I meditated upon this verse. Look at it again: "Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am." The "with" and the "where" got me excited. "With" and "where"--"with Me where I am." There's the locality, but the locality would be nothing if it were not "with Me." But the "with Me" would have diminished joy if it was not "with Me where." We've got the best--bless God--"with Me where I am."

Well, I move on in the third place. From the time she breathed her last and I cradled her in my arms, not only did she experience total conformity to the moral likeness of Christ, immediately pass into the face-to-face presence with Christ, but the one who dies in Christ is in the full consciousness of his existence brought immediately into the company of all the blood-washed saints of Christ.

While each one of us is born physically as an individual, I don't care if you're one of quintuplets, they all five didn't come out once. Each one has a number. You were first, you were third, you were second. You were born individually. And each one of us is going to die individually. We may have people surrounding us, or we may be all alone. But we came in individually, and we're going to go out individually. And God's salvation must be appropriated individually. God has no grandchildren. Each one must come to personal repentance and faith. Each one must experience new birth by the individual operations of God's almighty grace in Christ and by the Spirit. However, though the Bible sets forth this kind of very dominate individualism, God's salvation is not individualistic. In planning and procuring and applying His saving grace in Christ, God has something more in view than getting individuals changed and fit for His presence. Rather, God has a desire for a new humanity in Christ called His church, called His bride, called His body; pictured as the new Jerusalem, pictured as the city of God. All of the emphasis of Scripture is that God in Christ wants a new humanity. Therefore, the final state of the new heaven and the new earth is described to us in the image of a city. And when Paul is describing to us the return of Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, he says, "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord [in this state of perfect togetherness]."

Now if according to Hebrews 12:23, all who die in Christ are already in the fellowship of the spirits of just men made perfect, and we on earth have some kind of communion with Him, will not that relationship be exponentially augmented in love, in the graces that sweeten human relationships. You know what its like when here on earth there are times when the relationship and interaction with fellow believers

seems to be so utterly immunized from the outcropping of sin that we instinctively say what? This was a taste of heaven, where perfect love will reign.

I had a taste of that in these weeks with my sister and my daughter. You can imagine now, my daughter ordering her household under her husband with all her patterns; my sister who's been a widow for 14 years and a very competent take-charge woman (and I don't think I'm exactly milk toast), and we're all under one roof for weeks together. It was precious. Not one time was there any outcropping of any friction. If there was a little something that could have created it, we just looked each other in the eye and said, "Don't do that, that gets under my skin." "All right, I won't do it. Sorry." It was a wonder, and it reminded me of what heaven's going to be like, where everything that creates friction and tension and suspicion and ill-will and alienation-- not only will all that be obliterated, but those things we feel at times as we interact with one another, where we can't keep our hands off one another. The love so throbs through our being, we've got to crush one another with an embrace. Imagine when that's augmented to the perfection of the life of love in heaven and to some degree when the saints leave this world and they enter the world of spirits of just men made perfect; they are gathered into that fellowship of united glorified spirits in the immediate presence of God and of the Lamb. And one can only imagine the life of love that they already experience.

I've been thinking much about this in recent days. You read the biographies of saints and martyrs; we pray for brethren we have not seen, and yet what bonds of love we feel. Don't you fall in love with David Brainerd when you read his journal? Don't you fall in love with Spurgeon when you read *The Early Years*? "Man, where is he? I want to get him and hug him." You read the works of those whose thoughts are embalmed in printer's ink, and they become the very voice of Christ to us. And you want to embrace them; you want to see them and tell them how much you love them. If we can experience all that with this dunghill still in us, can you imagine what it's like when the dunghill's all gone and all that stuff breaks out into its full capacity in the presence of our God and the Lamb? There's a stanza of a hymn that I've sung many times, but I didn't understand it. Now I do. "The Church Is One Foundation"--what's the last stanza?

Yet she on earth hath union
With God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won.

And as we have some dimension of sweet communion now, bless God that the best is yet to come.

And then fourthly and finally, the one who dies in Christ is, in the full consciousness of his existence, brought immediately to experience the promised rest of Christ. And here I ask you to turn with me to the text I alluded to earlier, Revelation 14:13: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them." Here is a blessing pronounced upon those who die in the Lord. And the aspect of blessedness that is highlighted is not that they are done with sin, that they see Christ face to face, that they are gathered into the community of all the blood-washed, perfected spirits of saints in heaven, but in order that they may rest from their labors.

In parallel language, we have the familiar words of Matthew 11, so often preached evangelistically, and I think rightly so: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And when we come heavy laden with an accusing conscience, burdened down with a sense of the futility of life and our inability to put the pieces together, and God breaks through with the Gospel word of promise in Jesus Christ, and we come in all of our burdeness, and we cast the weight of our sin and our guilt and our hopelessness and purposelessness upon Christ, He says, "I'll give you rest. I'll put My yolk upon you; you'll learn of me. My yolk is easy; My burden is light." Yet under that yolk that Christ lays upon us, there is still the labor of life in general. It's life in a sin-cursed world, and God has not yet removed the curse that came upon our first father because of his sin. There is the labor of the Christian life that is described in some places like an arduous race, like a life and death battle, like wrestlers in striving. There is the labor of living with a decaying outward man that is indeed perishing. That's why Paul can say, "For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened." What happens the moment a saint breathes his or her last? There spirit leaves the theater of all the remaining labor, all the remaining burdens of life, all the striving, struggling aspects of the Christian life, and they enter into rest. One servant of God described it this way:

"But rest too [describing heaven], they be rest above all. Here, responsibilities, pain, and temptation; here, harassment by the demonic, persecution by the world, disappointment in friends; here, relentless, remorseless pressure requiring us to live at the limit of our resources and at the very edge of our endurance, but there, rest. The battle's o'er; the victory's won. The toil is behind us, and the danger past--no more the burden of the unfinished work or the frustration of inbuilt limitations, no sin to mortify, no self to crucify, no pain to face, no enemy to fear. But it's not all negative. It's more than rest from. It means sharing in the blessed of God so that in the very depth of our being, there is contentment and joy and fulfillment; there is total shalom, a sense of shear well-being. Every need is met; every longing is fulfilled; every goal is achieved; every sense is satisfied. We see Him; we are with Him. He holds us and hugs us and whispers, 'This is forever.'"

What can we know about our loved ones the moment they breathe their last? This is what the Bible says we can know: we can know their immediate transformation into the perfect moral likeness of Christ, their immediate usherance into the presence of Christ, their being gathered with all the blood-bought saints of Christ, and they experience the promised rest of Christ.

Now let me say in my closing applications, first of all, while we do not deny that death is still an enemy--it's called the last enemy, and it's ugly, and it's cruel. I know that now like I never knew it before. When that enemy caused my beloved to feed upon her own body for the last couple of weeks of her life, it was ugly. I understood what I heard Dr. Tozer say years ago, and I didn't understand him then. He was talking about our ability to love will be in direct proportion to our ability to hate: "Thou hast loved righteousness and hated iniquity." And he went on to say, "I hate the devil." And at the time Kruchev was still banging his shoe, and he said, "I hate Kruchev, and I hate sin, and I hate cancer." I didn't understand him then; I understand him now. Cancer was the tool of the last enemy to take away the desire of my eyes and the bride of my youth. Death's not pleasant, especially when it comes slowly, makes its presence known, and in a sense, challenges you and says, "Do what you can, I'll be victor in this life." It's an enemy; it's ugly; it's cruel.

But I want you to look at two passages of Scripture with me. 1 Corinthians 3:21-23. In the light of what I've preached concerning these four realities of the sequel to death for the one in Christ, listen to the words of the Apostle:

"Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are your's; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world [now I can understand that. He's saying, 'Why are you lining up behind your favorite preacher? They're all yours. They're Christ's gift to you. Embrace them all; receive the Word of God through them.' And furthermore, he say's, 'Life is yours; the world is yours. In other words, He who sits at the right hand of the Father with all things beneath His feet is ordering and governing everything in this world to advance His redemptive purposes in Christ. And if I'm in Christ, I'm encompassed in that universal reign of Christ. The world is mine'], or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are your's; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's."

Death is mine in Christ. That's what it says. Doesn't your Bible tell you that? My Bible says it. I don't care what translation you've got, it's clear, death is mine. The last enemy's mine? Yes, because in Christ, as Pastor McDearman so eloquently underscored at Marilyn's graveside, Christ has removed the sting of death, which is the condemning power of the law. And He has brought death captive to His own redemptive purposes. And all death can do is chase me out of this tattered tent and release me to be wholly conformed to the image of Jesus, to know the exquisite joy of the immediate presence of Jesus, to be found among the company of the people of Jesus, and to know the rest of Jesus. That's all death can do to me. That's all, nothing more. Death is mine.

I shall never forget standing in the graveyard of some of the Scottish Covenanters. These noble souls who were willing to be martyred rather than submit to the pressure of ecclesiastical systems that did not respect the Word of God. And they would refer to those ecclesiastical officers as Prelates. And I shall never forget a phrase on one of the tombstones. You could barely make it out. And these were the words: "And Prelates rage did but chase them up to heaven." I've never forgotten it. When they grabbed them and burned them at the stake, what did they do? They just chased them up to heaven. Death was theirs in Christ.

And then, of course, the familiar words of Romans 8, what Paul could say was his well-settled conviction and persuasion:

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 35-39).

I tell you, my brothers and sisters, this passage was such a comfort to me when my wife lay in a coma with no ability to communicate. And to know that this promise is true, knowing there are unseen demonic powers that would seek to drag her soul into hell, it was such a consolation to pray and say,

"Lord Jesus, You have access to the folds of her mind in areas where my words cannot go; You have access to the texture of her soul while it's still in that body. And you can wrap it up in Yourself and wrap it up in protecting angels and wrap it up in all the things at Your disposal and so preserve it, that when it leaves that body, it will be brought safely into Your presence."

I tell you, I wouldn't trade that confidence for ten thousand worlds. "Neither death shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Then one final text that I'm still not sure I understand all of its significance, but I've been sucking sweetness from it. And I hope you will, because your time's coming, my friend; my time's coming. In John 8:51, our Lord Jesus says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep My saying, he shall never see death." Now the unbelieving Jews picked up on that a few verses later and they misquoted it. They said, "Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and Thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death. Art Thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead?" He said a man would never see death. What did He mean? "He that keeps My word." That's the description of a true disciple, someone who is in life union with Jesus. And He says such a one will never see death. Well, I think what He's saying is this: because we are in union with Christ, and He has borne the wrath of God, the wages of sin which is death, we will never see death as the naked avenger of the justice and holiness of God. Christ has swallowed it up, buried it in His tomb, and we'll never see it. Marvelous promise: "If a man keep My saying, he shall never see death."

My final application, many of you know what it's going to be. There are not a few of you here, you're not in Christ. And when it comes to death, you ought to be scared witless at a sermon like this, because death will be the means by which your eternal state will be irreversibly fixed. "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." As death leaves you, the judgment will find you, and as the judgment finds you, eternity will hold you.

Now you may be very comfortable sitting here this morning living without Christ. But I want to ask you, are you going to die comfortably without Him? If God gives you a deathbed, are you going to be comfortable on that deathbed knowing there is sin for which you must answer before an all-holy, just God in the day of judgment; no where to hide? Every idle word, every unclean thought, every dishonest relationship, every single violation of the law of God--and the books will be open, and you will be judged out of the books.

My friend, I beg you to listen. Bring near your deathbed and ask yourself, "Would I want to die as I'm living today?" If you're honest, you'll have to say, "No, that's why I put away thoughts of death. I keep myself busy; I dim the music in my ears. I keep my feet and hands busy. I don't want to think about death." You can't non-think it away, my friend. You're going to die. The moment is coming when your soul and body will be wrenched asunder and your eternal state forever fixed.

I plead with you, give to your loved ones the joyous confidence my beloved gave to me. The greatest gift my wife gave me is not my children, not her years of selfless service and all the things I could extol until you'd say, "O, be quiet, I've heard enough." The greatest gift she gave me was to hold her lifeless form in my arms and to know that the spirit that had left that body was now resplendent with likeness to Jesus. She looked upon the face of Jesus, however disembodied spirits see, I don't

know, but I know they do. She's with Him in the company of Moses and Aaron and Elizabeth and Mary and Esther and all of the martyrs and the saints. And to know that's she's at rest--what a gift to give to a loved one. My friend, whatever else you give Mom and Dad, husband and wife, if you don't give them that, you're the biggest cheat upon the face of the earth.

I close with a little story for you children. A young girl at Portsea, Hampshire (that's somewhere in England)--she died at 9 years of age. And one day in her illness she said to her aunt with whom she lived,

"When I'm dead, I should like the pastor, Mr. Griffen, to preach a sermon to children and seek to persuade them to trust in the Lord Jesus, to love Him, to obey their parents, not to tell lies, but to think about dying and going to heaven. I've been thinking what text I should like the pastor to preach from at my funeral. [It's one thing for a 73-year-old woman to say, 'Honey, I think it would be lovely if Pastor Donnelly would preach at the funeral.' And unknown to him, one of the text he chose to preach on is one of the three texts we most frequently quoted to one another in her last days. But this is a 9-year-old girl.] Auntie, I think I know the text I want him to preach from--2 Kings 4:26. [That's the story of the Shunammite woman and the son and the prophet.] You're the Shunammite; the pastor, Mr. Griffen, is the prophet, and I'm the Shunammite's child. When I'm dead, I dare say, Auntie, you'll be grieved, though you need not be. The prophet will come to see you, the pastor. And when he says, 'How is it with the child?', you may say, 'It is well.' I'm sure it will be well with me, for I shall be in heaven singing the praises of God. And you ought to think it well too, Auntie."

Mr. Griffen accordingly fulfilled the wish of the 9-year-old child.

O, dear children, is that the kind of gift you'll give to your mommy and your daddy? If the news should break in that you have a terminal illness (and we hear in our prayer meeting letters it's not just old people that die), would you be able to say it's well? O, dear children, get into Christ. Look this seductive, lying world in the face and say, "I'll be done with it. All it can do is capture my heart and my body and my energies and drag me to hell. "The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever." And this is the will of God that you believe on His Son. Embrace Him in all the fullness that is in Christ. And should God give you a lengthy life, to die in peace and leave the legacy of the fragrance of a Christ-tinged life behind you, may God grant that that will be true of you.

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