

## FUTUREWORLD pt.22 3-1-15

### *Death*

Romans 5:**12-14a** *Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned— 13 for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses.* On New Year's Day Mike Sartelle, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Yazoo City, Mississippi, was travelling by auto with his wife Diane and their three children when their car was involved in a serious accident. Mrs. Sartelle and two of the children were injured but Mike and his seven year old son were killed. How do you feel when you hear a story like that? How do you react when death surprisingly jumps up and slaps you in the face? Mike Sartelle was an acquaintance of mine only, but the fact that I did know him, that his place in life was so similar to my own made me feel it a little more deeply than I would the death of another, and I, for one, can feel my stomach tightening up every time I think about his dying and contemplate the grief of his widow and his two surviving children. Death is not fun to think about is it? Not at all. It can be downright disturbing. That is why death is a part of the real world that we strive not to ponder. We do our best to suppress it beneath layers of conscious experience. When it comes to death there are three types of people: those who are afraid, those who won't think about it and those who believe the Bible. The majority of folks would fall into the middle category - the unthinking majority. A friend once told me that he asked his brother if he was prepared to die and his brother who was in his mid-20s said, "Gosh, I've really never thought about it." What about you? Have you, as a rational, thinking creature thought about the ever-present possibility of permanent extinction? I remember watching a film about death when I was in seminary, and in this film the narrator says, in all seriousness, "Death is one of the biggest events of your life." Half the class started laughing. I mean, that has to be the understatement of the century. Death is not one of the biggies, it is, as Fred Sanford put it, "The big one." It is a moment of such crisis that only the greatest psychological effort can block it from our thinking. But, it is a lot easier today than it used to be. Today's youth, and I include myself, have been shielded from death. My mother had three brothers and three sisters who died before she was fifteen. Her mother died when she was twenty. One generation later and I was 29 before anyone close to me passed away. And people nowadays usually die in hospitals and nursing homes, excluded from all but the medical professionals. To today's youth death happens only on TV and video games. To convince a young person otherwise is one hard job but if

you do you've gone a long way towards tearing down those barriers of arrogant invincibility and worldly security. I had a friend in college named Merwin Peake who was a Campus Crusade worker from Macon, Georgia. I remember Merwin's testimony of how he grew up in church but never took Christ seriously until at a Saturday night graduation party a drunken friend fell off a motel balcony eight floors to his death. The party ended a day early and Merwin and friends returned home for church where several church-kids, finally struck with the reality and imminent possibility of death, walked an aisle and made the Savior their Savior. Over forty million people will die on planet earth this year. That amounts to well over one per second. *Life is pain, Highness, anyone who says differently is selling something.* It's the truth and it must be faced.

So, we shall conclude our 21 part series on the Bible and the future by looking at this subject of death which, should our Lord tarry, will be part of the future for all of us. First off, we want to see exactly what death is, as defined in the Scripture. Normally we think of death as a termination. Death is simply the end of life; but as we saw last week, this is not the Biblical outlook. The Scriptures present death not so much as an event of termination but an event of separation. When we speak of a person dying we do indeed affirm that that person's earthly life has come to an end. Death means termination in that sense but it most certainly does not mean the end of that person. The human life continues beyond the grave but it continues without the body. At death, a separation occurs; there is a dividing of body and soul. Ecclesiastes 12:7 *then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.* Consistent with what we saw last time, the body returns to the ground from which it was made but the spirit or soul goes to be with God. I think of Stephen who was stoned to death in Acts 7 and when he was dying he cried out, "Lord Jesus, receive my what? My spirit." Body and soul are separated. And this is death. James 2:26 *just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.* Body without spirit is dead. Remember what Jesus said just before He expired? "Father, into Thy hands I commit my Spirit." And when He said it He gave up the ghost or the soul. His body went limp but his life continued. Do you see that? It is Scriptural to think of death more as separation than termination.

Next let's examine the origins of death. And death does have a beginning. In the garden of Eden there was no death. As initially created man was made to live forever. There was no death ahead for Adam unless...Well, God warned Adam didn't He? Genesis 2:16-17 *The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; 17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely*

*die.*” And when he did sin God kept his promise. Man died spiritually immediately; He was separated from God and that is spiritual death. But then also God planted within man the seeds of physical death so that we are always in the process of dying. So, in Romans 5 which we read it said that death came into the world thru one man and spread to all. Romans 5 says that death reigned and why did it? Because of sin. God says the wages of sin is death. ® That is where death came from. It is not natural. It is not normal. We were made to live forever. Death is a curse pronounced over us. And that is why death strikes us as being so wrong, so terrible. It is terrible! It is judgment for sin.

But, as the hymn we sing at Christmas says, “Jesus came to make his blessings flow , far as the curse is found.” The salvation of Christ makes an incredible difference at the gates of death, but so many don’t know that salvation. Death, to the unbeliever, can be nothing but a horror. Can you imagine facing death without a reasonable hope of heaven, without a belief in a life beyond? Live itself is unlivable without that. If you see death as the end of the road, as the your own termination then for you life is, at best, a cruel joke. And that is why so many refuse to think about it. The famous psychologist Carl Jung said about this that “no one can live in peace in a house he knows is shortly to tumble about his ears.” So, for one who is apart from the hope of Christ I say sincerely and with pity that any happiness or peace they enjoy is as superficial as the self-deceit by which they escape the painful thought of death. In his short story, *Pigeon Feathers*, John Updike deals with a little boy named David who is troubled about heaven, who wants to be assured there is one and that he will go there. In his catechism class he asks the pastor about it who says to him, “David, you might think of heaven as the way the goodness Abe Lincoln did lives after him.” David objected: “But is Lincoln conscious of it living on?” Later he says to his mother, “I don’t understand ministers who say it’s like Lincoln’s goodness going on and on.” Mother says, “I think Rev. Dobson made a mistake. You must try to forgive him.” David says, “It’s not a question of his making a mistake. It’s a question of dying and never moving or seeing or hearing anything ever again.” In exasperation his mother replies, “Darling, it is so greedy of you to want more when God has given us this wonderful day, and our farm, and you have your whole life ahead of you.” Finally, the young man says, “Mother, good grief, don’t you see, if when we die there’s nothing, all your sun and fields and what not are just a horror. It is all an ocean of horror.”

Enter Christianity. If you are a Christian then you profess a belief in the resurrection from the dead. You call *Lord* a man who said, John 11:25 *I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes*

*in Me will live even if he dies.* But do you really believe it? Christian, your faith, my faith, may give us some peace, joy, and other benefits in this age but I tell you its real test is death. Can your Christianity handle the test of death? And if it can't, what is it really worth? How do you know your eternal destiny is secure? Are you certain that, for you, death will mean life? Auguste Lecerf, while discussing epistemology, i.e. how we know we know, stops at one point and makes this profound assertion: *In religion what matters practically is to know that one is not the plaything of auto-suggestion: in the presence of the tomb we want to know whether eternal life is a reality or not.* You can be unsure of a lot of things and be no worse off for your uncertainty, but not about death. So, I ask you, "Are you ready to die? Has your faith prepared you to face eternity?" John Wesley, on a stormy boat ride to England, as a 35 year old Episcopal preacher, found his faith insufficient to handle the threat of death. On the same ship Wesley found a group of Moravian Christians who were the picture of peace though facing the same threat. Wesley knew this people had something he didn't and not long after he landed he learned what it was. Do you know what Wesley learned?

Remember that verse we read last week from Philippians 1? Paul said with absolute assurance 1:**21** *for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.* How could he know for sure? Is it really possible to be that sure of what lies beyond? James Denney has noted that whereas in Roman Catholicism assurance is a sin, and in Protestantism it is a duty, in the New Testament, it is simply a reality. Paul knew. Well, how could Wesley, how could Paul know? What was the ground of his confidence? It was simple: Paul knew that his good deeds outweighed his bad deeds. He knew that he had always believed in God and tried to do what He thought was right. So, why shouldn't he go to heaven? His was an open and shut case right? Wrong. Paul says Philippians 3:8 that he counted all things loss so that he might gain Christ **9** *and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.* There was no way that a self-made righteousness could ever give Paul this kind of confidence, but he rested, by faith, in the promise of God. From that - trust in God's promise- comes the assurance of the Christian.

So, we don't fear death because God has promised eternal life to all who trust His son. But what about fearing death for other reasons. Maybe someone fears death not because they dread what will happen but because they feel it is not yet their time, because they have too much left to do. I heard James Dobson say once that Paul could say, "to die is gain" only because he didn't have any young

children. Do you know what he means? I'm not sure I agree with him but I can understand where he is coming from. I don't want to die, primarily because of my wife and kids, and because of the extra work it would create for Taylor and Bruce. But, when I thought about this, I saw that the foundation for this fear is pride. By thinking this way I am essentially saying that I can't die because the world needs me to keep it straight. Not so. God may have an important task for me to accomplish but He knows better than me what that task is and He knows when I am done with it. When God calls me home I assume my work is over, the mission he had in mind for me is complete, no matter how it may appear to others. Whitefield once said, quote, "I am immortal until my work is done." Get that? ® I recently read the biography of Keith Green, a musician/evangelist who died at the age of 28. David Brainerd died at 29, Robert Murray Mcheyne at 33, Jesus Christ at around 33. What did Jesus say as He was dying? "It is finished."® He said, "I have accomplished all that the Father gave me to do." But you think, "Oh, what He could have done with thirty more years!" But don't forget who the Master is. Don't forget who is sovereign. We can face the possibility of death with peace, knowing that God is the one who numbers our days.

Well, there I go again moving into application. I hope you can see that having a Biblical outlook on death is practically very important. I close with three considerations of how this Biblical teaching should impact us. First, as has been suggested we may face the future which includes death for self and others with peace as we trust in the promise of God and the sovereignty of God. That faith in the Lord makes all the difference. John Piper suggest we imagine two skydivers. They are both free-falling. Their speed is the same. They both seem to be free. They are not entangled in any cords. They are not restrained by safety wires. They are as free as birds - it seems. But there is one crucial difference between the two. Only one has a parachute. Does this change the sense of freedom they enjoy? Certainly. Both are free to fall with gravity; but only one is free not to. The other is a slave of gravity and gravity will kill him in the end. If he can somehow deny that he has no parachute he might be able to have an exhilarating experience. But if he realizes he is doomed, he will be enslaved thru fear during his entire fall, and all the joy of his so-called freedom will vanish. He must either deny the reality or succumb to fear. Thus it is in this world. We either put on, by faith, the protection of Christ, or we live our lives a slave to illusion or a slave to fear.

Secondly, we see that the Scriptures inform us how to grieve over the death of others. I Thessalonians 4 is a chapter that presents the hope of the resurrection and it says there in verse **13** *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will*

*not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.* I've heard it said on the basis of that verse that Christians should not grieve when another Christian dies but that isn't what it says. What it says is that we shouldn't grieve in the same way as do unbelievers who lack the hope we have. Certainly Christians should grieve. When someone near and dear to you dies, even if that person is a Christian bound for heaven, something is wrong if you don't cry. But, here's the thing - what is it you are crying over? Do you cry for dear Joe who is now in paradise? Not at all. You cry over the separation. You weep over your own sense of loss, and over the loss which others experience. You don't need to hide the pain, but you also must not forget the promise and the hope. We are not separated forever; death will not win. That means that in a Christian funeral there is a need to face the pain, but there is also a need to celebrate the promise.

Our third application informs us how to think about our own deaths. We are to share Paul's attitude that to die is gain. We are to look ahead to our own homegoing with anticipation, not with dread. A Sunday School teacher once asked his class of children which of them wanted to go to heaven, and everyone raised a hand except little Johnny. So, he asked, "Johnny don't you want to go to heaven when you die?" Johnny said, "Oh sure I do when I die. I just thought you were getting up a group to go now." Most of us, if we had the choice, would not choose to die now, even though we believe it would be good. Now I understand that. The apostle Paul, out of love for others, preferred to continue in this life a while longer. That's okay, but what saddens me is how little longing for heaven we observe among Christians. Why do you suppose that is? AW Tozer claims that things used to be different. He writes, "Men used to look forward to heaven as a return from the wars, a laying down of the sword to enjoy in peace the home prepared for them. Sermons and songs in those days often had a martial quality about them, or perhaps a trace of homesickness. The Christian soldier thought of home and rest and reunion, and his voice grew plaintive as he sang of battle ended and victory won. But whether he was charging into enemy guns or dreaming of war's end and the Father's welcome home, he never forgot what kind of world he lived in. It was a battleground, and many were the wounded and the slain. How different today. The facts remain the same but our viewpoint is completely different. Now men think of the world, not as a battleground but as a playground. We are not here to fight; we are here to frolic." I think he is right. We are too immersed in and enamored with the world. That's why we hate to leave. If we were more engaged in fighting and less engaged in playing there would be less reluctance to enter our rest.

Now lest you misunderstand my point here let me add that it is not the Christian way to approach death, either for self or others with some type of phony cheerfulness. Paul never said “to die is fun.” Death is still death and it is not easy. The result may be sweet for the believer but the process is usually painful. Maybe you can relate to Woody Allen who said, “I’m not afraid to die; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” But thank God we know that death is not the end but a passageway to something that makes any pain worthwhile. Joseph Bayly was a Christian writer who went to Jesus a few years ago. Soon before his death he published a book entitled “Heaven” that is written in a Q and A format, as if the writer is speaking with God. Bayly says, “I’m ashamed to admit it, but I’m a little scared. I really like this world: the Rocky Mountains, the beach at Cape May, the fields behind our house, the barn through a mist on a gray wintry morning. How can I adjust to heaven when it’s so different? God responds:

“That world you like is but a womb.” “A womb?” “Yes, you may not perceive it in that way but you are bound within earthworld as surely as a baby yet unborn is bound within the womb. Maybe the baby would be scared to be born, to leave the womb.” “Then death is...” “Deliverance to life beyond your imagining.” In Jesus, what once was a curse has now become the entrance way to paradise. For Christ has triumphed over the grave. Paul says I Corinthians 15:55-57 *O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?* 56 *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; 57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. To God be the glory.*