

FUNERAL OF A LONG-TIME FRIEND

HEBREWS 9:27, 28

“Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 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” [HEBREWS 9:27, 28].

Among the most difficult services which a preacher will ever conduct is the funeral for a friend. Multiplied emotions bubble to the surface for the preacher; a thousand memories flood the mind. As the preacher looks out on those assembled for the service, his heart breaks as he looks in the faces of friends who grieve at the enforced parting. He will struggle to speak, willing himself not to weep in that critical hour. And that is my situation in this hour.

Kathie—beloved wife and mother, wonderful friend, gracious lady—is absent today; nothing we can do will bring Kathie back. Our purpose is to honour her memory by recalling the bright moments when she was with us. I remember Kathie as a generous lady who touched many lives. Did anyone ever visit her home without being invited to join the family for a meal? I’ve eaten many meals with Lance and Kathie; treated as though I was family, I was never made to feel as though I was a stranger or an outsider. For many of us, Kathie ensured that Christmas was anticipated as a time when we received some of the most delicious relish and canned goods anyone could imagine. For me, there were a few special times when working at my computer I would hear the doorbell ring and there would be Kathie and Lance dropping by for a cup of coffee and a visit. These were always special times.

All that can be done for a mortal being has now been done for Kathie. Now, we gather to honour her memory; but in a greater sense we gather to seek answers to one of life’s greatest questions—What happens when our loved ones are no longer with us? And in seeking the answer to this question, we can anticipate that we will find comfort.

It is natural for us to seek comfort when death has invaded the circle of our friendship or family. At such times, our hearts ache; and if we will find comfort when the last enemy has invaded our family, that comfort can only come through One who has conquered death. Only one Person has died and risen from the dead, Jesus Christ the Righteous. If we will discover anything more than a transient, ephemeral wish, we must look to Him who gives life.

In one letter found in the Word of God a revealing statement is recorded that gives great comfort to weary hearts. The text reads, “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 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” [HEBREWS 9:27, 28]. Focus on the statement just read, for in those words is great comfort for those who grieve.

A philosophy that asserts, “Be happy! Don’t worry!” guides a surprising number of people. Popular though that philosophy may be in modern life, it fails miserably when we face death. And each of us must face death, both as we see those whom we love taken from this life and when facing our own mortality. Experience, to say nothing of the Word of God, declares, “It is appointed for man to die once.” Death is a certainty for each of us.

As I read this divine statement, I note the phraseology employed: “It is appointed.” For each person listening today, we have an appointment with death. Knowing that I, also, have an appointment, I have often rested in the knowledge espoused by the Psalmist.

“I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, ‘You are my God.’
My times are in your hand!”

[PSALM 31:14, 15a]

For the individual resting secure in the hands of a God too wise to make a mistake and too good to needlessly hurt His beloved child, this knowledge is a great comfort.

Again, the statement is “It is appointed for man to die once.” We were created to know God and to enjoy Him forever. However, the Paradise into which our first parents were placed was ruined when they rebelled against the goodness of the Lord God. The creation was plunged into ruin through their sin; and since that time, death entered the world. Thus, we read the dark word, “Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come” [ROMANS 5:12-14].

Understand, then, that we are each under sentence of death. Ignoring the reality will not change the outcome. Denying our mortality will not avoid the sentence and what follows execution of that same sentence. Therefore, the writer has testified, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement.” There are consequences to the choices we now make. This time we call now, this present life, serves as the anteroom to eternity. We are each preparing to spend eternity either in the presence of the Living God or separated from Him forever.

Judgement is very much a part of our existence; and the Word of God speaks of several judgements. Sin was judged when the Son of God sacrificed His life in the place of helpless man. As the Apostle has written, “While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” [ROMANS 5:6-8].

There will be a judgement of the nations of this world when Christ Jesus returns. Those who are born from above, who have believed the message of life in God’s own Son, will be judged before Him. This judgement will reveal the perfection of Christ’s work in those who are His own dearly-loved people. There is no terror for the child of God to stand before Him, for we appear before the One who loved us and gave Himself for us. At that judgement, we will stand before Him who has been our Advocate, appearing before the throne of God to plead for us throughout the days of our pilgrimage. We thought we struggled alone, but throughout the days of our walk in this flesh, our Saviour has always been with us. There is great comfort for the child of God in the knowledge of Christ’s love for us and the glory that shall be revealed in us.

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There is, however, another judgement. I would be a liar if I denied that judgement of those who live only for themselves. If I failed to warn of that judgement, I would not be a friend to those in danger. For any who imagine that they can be “good enough,” I warn that the standard demanded is perfection, and each of us fall short of that standard. God’s Revelator saw this judgement when the veil separating time and eternity was drawn aside for a moment. He wrote, “I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done” [REVELATION 20:11-13].

Then, here is the great comfort for any who will receive it: “Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 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” [HEBREWS 9:27, 28]. This life is not all there is; there is more to come.

We are told of the day when Christ Jesus shall return in these beautiful words. “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18].

That is great encouragement. In the knowledge of what God has planned for those who trust Him, for those who look to Him, is great comfort. Death does not ultimately win; for the person who trusts the message of grace, death becomes a servant to usher him or her into the presence of life. Long millennia past, the patriarch Job asked, “If a man dies, shall he live again” [JOB 14:14]? On one occasion, Jesus received an urgent message that a friend named Lazarus was dying. When Jesus arrived in the little town of Bethany, Lazarus was already dead. Lazarus’ two sisters were waiting for Jesus to come. When He was drew near the village where the family lived, Martha, one of the sisters, rushed out to meet Him. In her sorrow, she sobbed out her grief, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The Master responded with a word that comforts grieving hearts to this day. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” [The account is given in JOHN 11:1-44].

I urge each one who grieves to look to Him Who is the resurrection and the life. I urge each one to find comfort in this One Who conquered death and Who has brought life and immortality to light. I point each one to Christ Jesus the Lord Who frees us from our sin and Who receives us without condemnation. Amen.