

It was C. S. Lewis who said that God whispers to us in our pleasures ... but shouts in our pains. He continued that thought by stating that this is God's megaphone to a deaf world. Perhaps God is shouting now. I see sorrow etched on many faces—perhaps because of missed opportunity, perhaps because of an intense sense of loss, perhaps because of confusion. Can God speak in our sorrow; and can He reveal His power in our grief? Is He able to assuage our grief and comfort our souls?

Where shall we turn when death comes? When our loved one is violently taken from us, how shall we respond? Christians are instructed about their response when a loved one is taken. Paul wrote, “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].

Scope in on that first sentence: “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” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:13]. I make no pronouncement on this dear lady whom we remember today; rather, I am speaking to the living, reminding you that the Living God has promised comfort and hope to His own people. In this hope, we Christians do not grieve as do those who are hopeless. We now possess life—not life in some indefinite realm, but life at this moment.

The sin of our first parents ensured that each of us is subject to death. It is not a question of if we must die; it is a matter of when we shall die. Long years past, a wise man wrote these words, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low—they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets—before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity” [ECCLESIASTES 12:1-8].

There is a day when the spirit of each of us must return to the Creator who gave it. We do not answer to a mere man for our choices in life; rather, we must all answer Him who gives life to all. If we are hopeless in the face of death, it can only be because we have ignored the Creator. If we grieve excessively, it must be because we have no hope. However, if we face death as we have faced life—bravely, boldly, courageously—we shall be filled with hope. Those without hope are described in the encyclical we know as Ephesians. There, we read that those who are “separated from Christ” are identified as “having no hope and without God in the world” [EPHESIANS 2:12].

The deep sorrow we feel when one of our acquaintances dies arises from our own sense of vulnerability—from the knowledge that we, too, must one day give an account. If we know that we are unprepared, we shrink from the thought. Though we may attempt to push far from our mind the thought that we must face God, the knowledge nags at us, making us restless. So, we try to push from our thoughts the knowledge that we have a date with God. We are driven to find a momentary respite—dulling our sense of dread through alcohol, through drugs, through immorality, through anything that for a brief moment demands our full attention and allows us to forget that we must all appear before the Great Judge.

So many of us, when we are confronted, will contend that we are spiritual, or we will argue that we believe there is a God, or we will say we will one day make peace with the Creator; but time has a way of slipping away and we know that we are in peril. The Apostle to the Gentiles, speaking to a learned crowd in the most sophisticated city in the world, pointedly addressed their foolish choices when he said, “I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we are indeed his offspring’” [ACTS 17:22-28].

He continued by pointing to what is certain—the Judgement of all mankind. “Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” [ACTS 17:29-31].

And that is the reminder I bring to you in this time of sober reflection: each of us must give an answer before the Creator. Each of us must stand before God. How shall we answer? The call of God is to believe the message of grace that He has given. The Son of God gave His life as a sacrifice because of our wicked, selfish choices. He broke the bonds of death, rising from the dead. Now, He calls each of us to believe this message saying, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That promise continues by quoting an ancient prophet, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

Receiving the sacrifice of the Son of God brings peace with God, assuring each of us that we may stand before the Creator when this life is ended. Let us ensure that we have done so, even today. Amen.