

DAL BROWN FUNERAL
2 MARCH 2013
JAMES 4:14

“You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”

Occasionally, we receive a gift so precious that it cannot be truly evaluated until it is taken from us. Among the more precious gifts that any of us may ever receive are gifts of friendship. I was enriched by my friendship with Dal Brown. Dal was a parishioner; but he was much more than a parishioner—he was my friend.

Dal showed up in church one Sunday. I didn't know who he was; he situated himself at the back of the building, seated to my left. He listened intently to the message I presented that morning. We spoke briefly at the conclusion of the service, though the conversation wasn't particularly memorable. However, he was present in the same seat the following Sunday. This time, he asked if Lynda and I would go to dinner with him one evening. I agreed to his request after consulting my social convener. That evening was the beginning of a great friendship.

Dal was an encourager, a constructive critic, a debate partner, a political junkie—more than anything else, he was my friend. Dal wasn't a complainer, despite experiencing setbacks from time-to-time. Such reversals disturbed him primarily because he saw them as threats to commitments he had made to others. Nevertheless, he would phone, asking that I pray with him as we talked through the looming challenges. Despite any concerns about the issues facing him, he was always careful to insist that I not speak of his concerns to the congregation; he was a private man. If he gave glory to Christ, that was as it should be; however, he did not want attention focused on himself.

We shared many laughs and numerous concerns. None of the men present one particular Saturday morning will forget how the couple at the table next to ours got up, loudly complaining about the rednecks beside them. Dal laughed about that incident for months afterward, as did many of us; he was amused at the thought that we were indeed rednecks. He reveled in his roots—roots that went deep into the prairie soil. He had dirt under his fingernails—honest dirt; he was unable to surrender the need to be atop a tractor or to be operating a combine.

Dal was passionate about his nation, praying often that God would give wisdom to those who dedicated themselves to governing. He was equally concerned for the United States, recognising that should they degenerate, they would drag down our own nation.

Mostly, however, Dal Brown was passionate about his relationship to Christ Jesus. He prayed for his family, asking God to make them bold in their faith, asking that God would provide for them and asking that God would keep them in safety. When family members strayed, he was moved with compassion to pray for their life, asking that God would awaken them to their peril. He was deeply in love with Joan, praying often for her health and asking that God would give her strength. This was the Dal I knew.

He prayed often, and fervently, for those whom he knew to have no testimony of grace. He was deeply concerned for many who embraced religion without giving evidence of a transformed life. He prayed frequently for many such people. Undoubtedly, some of you sharing in this service today are beneficiaries of Dal's prayers. Some of you have become religious, but you have yet to receive the grace of God that leads to life. The evidence for this deplorable condition is an unchanged life. That knowledge weighed heavily on Dal's heart.

Above all else, Dal Brown was a man of faith. We may be confident that, for him, faith has become sight. However, as was true for Abel, so it is true for our brother and friend, Dal, “Through his faith, though he died, he still speaks” [**HEBREWS 11:4**]. His life and his testimony speak to those who knew him; and his witness will continue to speak for the duration of our lives and beyond if we heed the pleas that he presented.

Dal lived in the confidence that there is a God and that it is the duty of people to know and to love this God. Moreover, Dal held the conviction that loving God consisted of more than merely going to a performance disguised as a religious service. It grieved him to think that friends could be complacent in faith, attending services without evidence of transformation; this was the occasion of many conversations between us. “How could a person,” he would wonder, “claim to know God and then live as though He was non-existent?” The only answer is that such people have deceived themselves; and that knowledge weighed on his mind. In Dal’s view, people claiming to be Christian because they went to church made no more sense than claiming to be Jewish because one was born in a bagel factory. That friends could imagine that they were Christian because they had participated in a rite at some point was a source of deep sorrow to Dal. Of course, baptism does nothing for one who is lost—they go into the water a goat and they come out a goat. Either one is born from above, or one is not saved.

Dal came to faith early in life. His mother listened to Charles Fuller as he preached each Sunday afternoon on the Old Fashioned Revival Hour. The strains of Rudy Atwood playing “Heavenly Sunshine” would announce that another powerful message would shortly be heard. Under powerful preaching, Dal came to faith early in life. As you might imagine, his turning to the Master was analytical. “If I become a Christian, I’ll be persecuted,” he reasoned. “If I don’t, I’ll be condemned eternally.” The choice presented was that he might suffer censure and ridicule now, or he would assuredly suffer eternal separation from God. The analysis left the young boy no choice. Thus, Dal declared, “I choose to believe Jesus is the Christ.”

I was able to visit with Dal each day during his final week in hospital. We all recognised that he was ill; but none of us could have imagined that the illness would lead to his death. Joan’s phone call on Sunday morning telling us that Dal had died stunned me into silence. However, my mind turned immediately to Solomon’s words, “Man does not know his time” [**ECCLESIASTES 9:12**].

Weighing the sorrowful news we had received, I recalled a sermon I had presented just a few weeks before. James, the brother of our Lord, wrote, “You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” [**JAMES 4:14**]. In this solemn hour, the words penned so many years ago should serve to stimulate our minds and awaken our consciences.

A funeral provides opportunity to remember the life of the one who died; in the culture of this day, we speak of celebrating the life of the deceased. More importantly still, the funeral is a time for the living to reflect on the brevity of life—the urgency to prepare for the life to come; for there is a life beyond this moment we call “now.” We are created to know God, to enjoy Him. However, because of our fallen condition, none of us can know Him in this sinful condition. It is necessary that we prepare to meet God.

A dear woman, a parishioner in a congregation I pastored some years past, spoke pointedly to her husband in my presence one evening. “Garnet, if you were going on a trip to Montreal, you would be making preparation. You would secure your tickets, reserve rooms, pack your bags. You say you are going to heaven. However, I never see you getting ready. You don’t read your Bible and you never pray. Are you sure you are going to heaven?”

The question could be asked of some here this day. You say you are getting ready for heaven, but you have no heart for God or for His glory. Are you sure you are going to heaven? Perhaps you are depending on your membership in a church, or you are depending on a rite performed at some point or perhaps you are depending upon the fact that you are not a bad person. May I say, with a heart of compassion, that all such dependence is folly-wide-the-mark.

Should you imagine that you will have ample time at some future point to prepare for the inevitable, I am compelled to remind you of James' warning: "You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" [JAMES 4:14]. James is not saying that life is brief; he is saying that *you* are a vapour. When we breathe on a brisk winter morning, our breath appears as a vapour that we can see. That vapour dances momentarily on the shifting winds, and then it is gone. That vapour has no strength; it is unable to move anything. It has no permanence; it is transient, evanescent, ephemeral, fleeting. That is your life.

Dying is difficult; but we are born under sentence of death. I understand that one need do nothing in order to die; one only needs to be there. Nevertheless, death is unnatural—it was never in the plan of God. However, our first parents rebelled against the Creator and plunged the creation into ruin. Now, all mankind is born dying. Even for the righteous, dying is difficult. Peter asked,

"If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"

[1 PETER 4:18]

Pondering the fact that we must each give an account of life to Him who gives life, how will you respond? Do you have peace with God? Do you know that should life as you know it cease this day that you will be received into heaven to live eternally with saints, angels and the Son of God? There is a promise for each one that sin can be forgiven, that each of us can be assured that we are accepted in the Beloved Son, that each of us possesses eternal life.

Our brother has been welcomed into the presence of God. I don't say this because I am permitted insight that others don't have; I say this because of the promise of God. The child of God has this confidence expressed through the words of the Apostle. "We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:8]. We are confident that God has provided a place for us. Jesus Himself promised, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going" [JOHN 14:1-4].

However, we dare not presume; the promise is for those who are saved. The Son of God died because of you. He was buried and He rose from the dead on the third day. He conquered death, and His life is offered to all who will receive Him as ruler. This is the reason we hear the promise of God, "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. For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" [ROMANS 10:9-13].