

EZEKIEL 24:15-18

WHEN DEATH HAS TAKEN MY LOVED ONE

“The word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down. Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your shoes on your feet; do not cover your lips, nor eat the bread of men.’ So I spoke to the people in the morning, and at evening my wife died. And on the next morning I did as I was commanded.”¹

Death is inevitable; but that does not mean that it is natural. It is obvious that the statistics on death are pretty impressive—one out of one dies. From that perspective, death seems as if it is entirely natural—a final act of the drama of life. However, death was not in God’s original plan. Our first father received the divine command: “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die” [GENESIS 2:17]. Undoubtedly, Adam communicated this warning to Eve, the woman whom God created to be a helper that would make him complete. This is the most probable explanation for her knowledge that eating of the fruit of that tree would bring death [see GENESIS 3:3].

Immediately upon eating the fruit, the spirits of the sinning pair were separated from God who is life. They began what has become the inexorable, inevitable journey that concludes with the return of the body to the dust from which it was formed. By Adam’s disobedience, not only the race, but all creation was plunged into ruin and decay. Since that time, death has ruled over all mankind, even over those who have not sin in the same way that Adam transgressed. The evidence for this is that even those who have not openly rebelled—innocent children and those who are born horribly injured in their minds so that they cannot be responsible for their actions—are subject to death. Indeed, we are compelled by the facts to acknowledge the accuracy of the dark logic that teaches that “In Adam all die” [see 1 CORINTHIANS 15:22].

Every culture has mourning rituals. These ceremonial rites reflect commonly held beliefs concerning the nature of man, his relationship to God and the afterlife. Even casual reflection demonstrates that our understanding of spiritual truth is revealed through our mourning rituals. What rites should mark the passing of our loved ones? How do we honour God when death visits? How shall we prepare for death? These are pertinent questions that are worthy of exploration by those who seek to discover and pursue the will of God. Join me, then, in reviewing what must surely have been the most difficult day of Ezekiel’s sorrowful life.

THE LAST THING WE TALK ABOUT — We seldom like to speak about death. An ancient saying informs us that the grey hairs are the messengers of death. I might add that laugh lines, expanding girth and diminished visual acuity are reasonably accurate reminders of our mortality. Ours is a youth culture, in which elderly people struggle to cling to their youth. Anti-wrinkling creams and Botox injections, tummy tucks and breast implants, liposuction and dyed hair, are major means of attempting to defy the evidence of our pending death. Maybe we really believed that silly drivel that was current when we were young—you remember the old saw that spoke of living fast and leaving a beautiful corpse. However, there is nothing beautiful about death. Death truly is “the last enemy,” as the Apostle says [see 1 CORINTHIANS 15:26].

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Because our culture worships at the shrine of youth, we neglect the wisdom of past years—wisdom that taught us to show respect to the elderly. Even among the churches of our Lord we witness profound neglect of the instruction provided in the Word. When did you last hear an exposition of **LEVITICUS 19:32**? “You shall stand up before the gray head and honour the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.” Did you get that? Honouring our elderly is tantamount to honouring God. We appear unconvinced that God knew what He was talking about when He included these verses in the Word:

“Grey hair is a crown of glory;
it is gained in a righteous life.”

[**PROVERBS 16:31**]

“The glory of young men is their strength,
but the splendour of old men is their grey hair.”

[**PROVERBS 20:29**]

The fear of death drives us to push far from our mind any thought of our own mortality. Fearing death more than anything else, we don't want to give any opportunity for unwelcome thoughts to intrude, disquieting our mind. So, the elderly are treated politely, but generally ignored. Those who are ageing attempt to defy the inevitable, pampering their bodies, painting their faces and spending a king's ransom on creams and potions guaranteed to make them young. Nevertheless, as the poet observed:

*“And come he slow, or come he fast,
It is but death who comes at last.”*²

One of the more thought-provoking quotations concerning our ultimate end is that written by Sir Walter Raleigh. ***“O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hath cast out of the world and despised. Thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, Hic jacet!”*** His brilliant mind also observed of mankind, ***“The world is but a large prison, out of which some are daily selected for execution.”***

There was a day which seems utterly foreign to our modern culture, though that day was not so long ago. In that former, more civil day people died at home, surrounded by loved ones and comforted in the knowledge of a family's love. Today, we place our ill and injured in sterile environments, where cold, gleaming metal and dull plastic embraces them and chills their body even as the flame of life flickers dully. Tubes are inserted into every orifice, and officious technicians draw samples of body fluids as required until the spirit returns to God who gave it. There are none to hold the hand of the dying or to stroke the fevered brow, only the monotonous ritual of probing and poking until the dying are mercifully released by death.

If we are terrified of death, I suspect it is because we never learned to live; for had we known what it is to live, we would not fear death. In truth, the spectre of death does not terrify the Christian, though the process of dying may undoubtedly be unpleasant.

² Sir Walter Scott, “Marmion” (1808)

This is surely the intent of Jesus' words, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" [MATTHEW 10:28]. While we do not seek death, neither do we fear death. Though we are not eager to be separated from loved ones or fail to witness the growth of our children, we do not live in fear of death. Though there exist false religions that worship death, if not in name than in their actions, we who are Christians love life. We love life so much that we declare eternal life in Christ Jesus the Lord. We point all who are willing to receive that life to look to Him who gives life. Jesus did say, after all, "I came that [people] may have life and have it abundantly" [JOHN 10:10].

Ezekiel was engaged in doing God's work. God had appointed him to serve as a prophet, though he was among the captives exiled to Babylon. There, he had faithfully declared the mind of God though his words were an assault on the religious leaders. On a day, he arose as he always did. As he prepared for his day, he was informed by the Word of the LORD warning him, "Son of man, behold I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke" [EZEKIEL 24:16]. His response was to deliver the Word of God, warning the people as he always did; then, at evening his wife died. The next morning he obeyed the will of God.

Make no mistake, the Word of God makes it plain that Ezekiel loved his wife. God identified her as "the delight of [Ezekiel's] eyes" [VERSE 16]. Theirs was not a loveless marriage, nor was theirs a union of convenience; rather their marriage was a source of joy and delight for Ezekiel and for his wife. Ezekiel is one of the strangest preachers in the Word of God, for he preached messages that spoke volumes without saying a word. It is not easy to be a prophet of God. People do not love a prophet because the message he carries is so hard to receive. Ezekiel's messages were impossible to ignore because they were so graphic.

On one occasion he gathered up as much of his earthly goods as he could carry at one time and set them in the street in front of his house. At evening he dug through the wall of his house and brought out his luggage as though he was going into exile. He covered his face so he could not look about, picked up his baggage and carried it on his shoulder before all the people [see EZEKIEL 12:1-6]. Of course, his actions generated attention. Children hurried to get their parents, and friends alerted their neighbours. A crowd gathered and the people watched the spectacle in silence, until at last someone spoke. "What are you doing, Ezekiel?" At this, the man of God answered, "I am a sign for you: as I have done, so shall it be done to them. They shall go into exile, into captivity" [EZEKIEL 12:11].

On another occasion, Ezekiel had been commanded to groan. He was not commanded to utter merely a little grunt, but he was to groan as though his heart was breaking and as though he was consumed with grief [see EZEKIEL 21:6]. When the people asked what caused him to groan so pitifully, he replied, "Because of the news that it is coming. Every heart will melt, and all hands will be feeble; every spirit will faint, and all knees will be weak as water. Behold, it is coming, and it will be fulfilled" [EZEKIEL 21:7].

Immediately before our text, Ezekiel had been commanded to place various choice cuts of meat into a pot. Then, he was to pour in water and set the pot on a fire until the broth boiled and the meat cooked. Then, he was to take out of the pot various pieces of meat without consciously selecting one over another. Then, rather than scouring the pot he was to empty out the broth and again set the pot with the meat on the fire until the meat burned and the copper began to melt. The cleansing would be accomplished by fire rather than by scrubbing with soap and water [see EZEKIEL 24:1-11]. The purpose was to warn of the fury of God coming upon the sinful people. God warned it was, "On account of your unclean lewdness, because I would have cleansed you and you were not cleansed from your uncleanness" [EZEKIEL 24:13].

Another of Ezekiel's sign messages was that he was unable to speak and at the same time his movement was restricted by the hand of God [see EZEKIEL 3:25-27]. Following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, news would not reach the Jews in Babylon until five months had passed. The first deportation after conquest by the Chaldeans had divided families—some family members going into captivity and others having been left in Jerusalem. With the final destruction of the city, many of the sons and daughters who had been left in Jerusalem would have been killed. On the day news arrived of the final overthrow of the city and the destruction of the temple, the divine restrictions on Ezekiel's speech and his movement were lifted. At that time, the man of God was again able to move about freely and to say whatever he wished to say [see EZEKIEL 33:21, 22]. It was a sign of Ezekiel's veracity and accuracy as God's spokesman.

In our text for this day, we read that God's prophet was given what must surely have been his most difficult assignment. He was notified that he would suffer the loss of his beloved wife, and he would not be permitted to mourn her death. This was undoubtedly the most painful of all his action sermons. In order to preach this message, it would be necessary for him to experience unimaginable grief. Adding to his sorrow, he would not be permitted to grieve as others grieve. He would be required to silently shut up his tears inside and refuse to weep.

There was a purpose for this weird method of preaching. Just as his wife was the delight of his eyes, so the delight of the Jewish people was their temple. They thought the temple would never be destroyed—it was the House of God. Though God had delivered them into the hands of their enemies, sending many of them into exile, the temple had continued to stand. Though God had been preaching through His prophets for years—warning the people of pending doom for the nation, the people had not hearkened to the divine call to repentance. Ezekiel had one day to prepare for his wife's death, but the people would have no warning when the temple would be removed forever. Though they should not have been surprised that God took away what they valued so greatly, they would nevertheless be astonished.

We look at the record and we wonder at God's method. However, one truth that stands out is that no one—not even the prophet of God—is greater than God. God's purpose for His divine plan is greater than us, even greater than our congregation. We imagine that God needs Canada, but God's purpose is greater than Canada. In fact, when we pause to think, we remember, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son” [JOHN 3:16]. We become attached to congregations, to denominations, to church buildings—but the work of God is greater than any of these things. Ezekiel was a great prophet in no small measure because he understood that he served the True and Living God, even when such service was painful.

We don't know what caused his wife's death; we do know that God gave him one day to prepare his heart. I can only imagine his numbness as he conducted his ministry on that day. Did he speak to his wife, telling her what God had revealed to him? There is no hint of that in the Word. I cannot imagine the confusion this man of God must have felt. Was it possible that he misunderstood the divine Word? What if he was wrong? What if he only had mistaken a vague feeling for the certainty of a Word from the LORD? Would it be right for him to say something to his beloved wife? Surely he would not want to alarm her by speaking of his dilemma? Confusion and numbness must have marked the entire day for the prophet of God. Then, at evening his wife died. Whatever the cause of her death, it was sudden.

Why should anyone be surprised at death? If Christ delays in coming again, death is inevitable for each of us. ***Death never takes the wise man by surprise; he is always ready to go.*** An old English proverb observes, “***Death is a shadow that always follows the body.***” There is a dark shadow hanging over the head of each of us; it is not a question of “if,” but of “when.”

MOURNING RITUALS — Ezekiel's refusal to mourn was not by personal choice; it was a symbolic demand placed upon him by God. This divine requirement must surely have accentuated his grief. Mourning rituals provide a measure of comfort, speaking as they do of our hope and expressing what we value most. However, I have observed some changes within our culture during my more than three decades of labour in the service of the Master.

When I began serving the churches of our Lord, it was common that families would have a memorial service. The emphasis at these services was comfort from the Word of God as the people recalled the promises of the Word. As time has passed, the services that are provided focus more on trying to recite humorous events concerning an individual. It is common today that the funeral services are conducted by an employee of the mortuary. These services have a few vapid statements concerning death and life. There will be the inevitable montage of photos and perhaps a couple of songs that the dead person once enjoyed. There will be an open mic and the opportunity for various people to share remembrances. However, there will be no serious pondering of responsibility to the Lord or clear presentation of His mercy and our hope in Him.

One of the more memorable incidents highlighting this transition occurred more than twenty years ago. I received a call from a funeral director asking if I would be willing to work with a family; the family had specifically requested a Baptist pastor. The mother had died penniless following the collapse of an investment service. I was pleased to accept the request and made arrangements to visit with the son and daughter to speak to them before the services.

The son, a man of perhaps forty years of age, was not present when I first arrived at the home. However, he appeared within minutes of my arrival. When I introduced myself, he said, "We don't want no hellfire and brimstone sermon."

I assured him that I was not in the habit of preaching "hellfire and brimstone sermons" at funerals. However, I was forthright in assuring him that I would speak of Christ's sacrifice and the hope of the resurrection, reminding mourners of our responsibility to know God. This was not good enough for this man who was clearly agitated and angry. He raised his voice and again asserted, "We don't want no hellfire and brimstone sermon."

Our conversation went on in this vein for a matter of minutes as I sought to assure him that I would not embarrass the family nor preach a "hellfire and brimstone message." In fact, I was careful to assure him that I usually spoke for no more than ten or fifteen minutes at a funeral. However, he grew increasingly angry and insistent, seemingly deaf to my assurances. Throughout this exchange he would alternately stand, clenching his fists and glower before sitting down and turning beet red as he again worked himself into a rage.

After a few minutes of this exchange, I asked why the family wished the services of a Baptist pastor. "Well, we are Baptists," he nearly shouted. Further questioning elicited the information that neither he nor his sister, nor his mother for that matter, had attended the services of a church in at least thirty years. However, when they were little children she had sent them to a Baptist Sunday School, and for that reason they considered themselves to be Baptists.

Because of his extreme agitation and his increasing lack of self-control, I thought it best to take my leave, permitting him to cool down. Unwittingly, I asked if I might pray with the family before leaving. The man again raged, "We don't want no hellfire and brimstone sermon." As he spoke this time, he stood and clenched his fists and advanced menacingly toward me.

I stood and said, "If your mother had not had the audacity to die, I would not find it necessary to address the issue of human accountability before the Living God. However, your mother did die and if I speak I am compelled to address such themes."

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The man was taken aback by my forceful statement. As he stepped back, he said one last time, “We don’t want no hellfire and brimstone sermon.” At this, I said, “You do not need a Baptist pastor. You do not need a Christian pastor. I will be happy to recommend a Buddhist or a Unitarian or anyone but a Christian minister. Good day.” With that, I excused myself and left.

I stopped to inform the funeral director of the outcome of the visit, though he was fielding a call from the daughter as I entered the office. Later, I asked who had conducted the service for this family. He told me that they had found a United Church minister who told them that their mother was in heaven and that everything was fine with her. He offered a prayer and carefully avoided mentioning the Name of the Saviour. Essentially, the family had concocted a fable that fit the myth they had created—there was neither truth nor hope offered. The funeral director judged it to be one of the saddest spectacles he had ever witnessed.

Some years later I was in conversation with that same funeral director. I asked how many of the services no longer had a message of hope and life in the Son of God. He estimated that at least one-quarter of the services were secular services, and of those that were “Christian” in name, many had become a business. One Anglican priest had resigned his parish to do nothing but conduct funerals. His services were for sale. The conditions were that he would appear ten minutes before the service began. He wanted a sizeable stipend waiting in an envelope on the pulpit. He would read a couple of Scripture passages and recite a prayer, being careful to assure mourners that the departed loved one was in heaven in the presence of God.

I was incredulous as I asked, “Do people actually pay him?”

“He can’t begin to meet the demand,” was the response given by that funeral director.

The candyfloss that passes for theology in modern church life is revealed in our mourning rituals. We want a God who asks nothing of us, yet is prepared to give us all that we demand. We want a God who though powerless to change reality will nevertheless make certain that we have a happy afterlife. We want a God who smiles benignly at our self-absorption and yet showers us with happiness. We live lives that are centred in ourselves, and our mourning rituals reflect an attitude that says, “Move on with your life.” We have bought into the lie that we are just highly evolved animals. If modern mourning rituals are applied we had as well join hands and sing, “I’m Glad You’re Gone, You Rascal, You” while celebrating the survival of the fittest.

The mourning ceremony that was expected of Ezekiel is outlined in terse detail. Mourners were expected to lament loudly; but Ezekiel could only sigh, and that not loudly. He was permitted no tears. In mourning, the turban—the symbol of office for a priest and festal headwear for a layman—was set aside and the head was covered in dust and ashes. However, Ezekiel was proscribed from setting aside his turban. During times of deep sorrow, mourners removed their sandals; but Ezekiel would be compelled to keep his footwear on. Covering the lip, putting on a veil—compulsory for a leper or as a sign of disgrace in other circumstances—was a sign of sorrow. Ezekiel was prohibited from covering his face. Neighbours brought in food to be shared for mourners. However, Ezekiel could not receive such meals.

The purpose of all these steps was to invite and draw support from neighbours. It was to share the sorrow arising from the death of a loved one. It was to invite neighbours to share in the recitation of prayers for mercy. To this day, the Jewish people invite others to make minyan—a quorum of ten males—to recite Kaddish for the dead. These prayers, properly a doxology in which the Name of the Living God is magnified and sanctified in the mind of the worshippers. This recitation of doxologies will continue for a year following the death of a loved one. It is an honour to be invited to make minyan for this purpose; participation in making minyan to recite Kaddish is considered a benevolent act.

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We witness a similar event in the ministry of Jeremiah that provides insight into ancient funerary rituals of the Jewish people. “Thus says the LORD: Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament or grieve for them, for I have taken away my peace from this people, my steadfast love and mercy, declares the LORD. Both great and small shall die in this land. They shall not be buried, and no one shall lament for them or cut himself or make himself bald for them. No one shall break bread for the mourner, to comfort him for the dead, nor shall anyone give him the cup of consolation to drink for his father or his mother. You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will silence in this place, before your eyes and in your days, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride.

“And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, ‘Why has the LORD pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the LORD our God?’ then you shall say to them: ‘Because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the LORD, and have gone after other gods and have served and worshiped them, and have forsaken me and have not kept my law, and because you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn, evil will, refusing to listen to me. Therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour’”

[**JEREMIAH 16:5-13**].

Our mourning rituals should be instructive; they should be so crafted as to invite others to join us in seeking eternal comfort. However, if the entire focus of our mourning is on ourselves, or if we fail to point to eternal comfort, there is but transient value at best in all that is done. What is needed is hope in the face of despair, peace in the midst of the maelstrom, the certainty that death is not an end but a beginning, confidence that the grave is not our eternal home, and courage to look upward to Him who gives life in a time when it seems as if death has conquered. Christian ritual points to truth that is eternal and pregnant with power to give courage and hope.

DIVINE COMFORT — When word circulated that Ezekiel’s wife had died, neighbours hurried to his home. What they found must have caused consternation. He was not lamenting or weeping. He still wore his turban, marking his position as a priest of God; neither had he covered his head with dust and ash. His sandals were yet on his feet and his face was not veiled. When they brought the food of mourners into the home, he did not eat it.

Undoubtedly, the people, knowing Ezekiel’s role as God’s prophet were motivated to ask him what his actions meant; they recognised that his actions presaged something momentous. Whatever he might say would be significant. When at last he spoke, his words prophesied divine judgement and promised comfort that always attends repentance.

In the midst of their own pending sorrow the people would experience divine comfort, though from the viewpoint of the world it would seem scant comfort. To this point in his “ministry,” Ezekiel had been dumb, unable to speak. On the day the people would experience their greatest grief, God would loose the prophet’s tongue. There would be a divine message for the heart of those willing to receive it in that day.

Among the people that were in one of my congregations in the Lower Mainland was a godly Dutchman. He had fought in the Dutch underground during the Second World War. Speaking with Gerry on one occasion he related how no one was interested in church in the years preceding Germany’s invasion of Holland. The pastors preached desultory sermons to empty pews; the people were busy with their daily routines—too busy for God.

The Sunday following the invasion by the Germans, Gerry said all the churches were full. In days of turmoil, people long to hear if there is a word from the Lord God. Nothing has changed. Following the deadly Muslim attack against the United States, churches throughout North America experienced dramatically increased attendance as people tried to make sense of what had happened. In their dismay they wondered whether God had anything to say.

Tragically, many pastors were unprepared to speak a word from the Lord. They had grown complacent, perhaps even apathetic, and they were incapable of addressing the fears of the people. Nevertheless, in times of crisis, people seek knowledge of the Lord.

I have preached far too many funeral sermons in the days of my service before the Lord. I make it clear to those who request my service that I will address the great issues of life and death. I will speak of accountability before the Lord, of man's mortality, and of God's great mercy to all who are willing to receive it. Though there are individuals who react with disgust, even with choler, at such declarations, the most welcome hearing the verities and the certainties of the Word of God.

When death comes, as it must, how shall we who are Christians respond? I trust there will be good friends to support my loved ones, to remind them of the message of life I have preached. I trust there will be a congregation of godly men and women who speak of the hope in Christ that we have shared. I shall have fought the final battle; I shall have moved from this ramshackle tent to put on my eternal home. You and I have been taught by the Apostle, "We are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" [2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8].

With the Apostle, I can testify with every believer in the Risen Lord, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" [PHILIPPIANS 3:20]. At death we cross from one territory to another. Whenever I go back to the United States, I have to have my passport; it must be in order before I reach the border. When I return to Canada, I must have documents proving that I have a right to be here. When I move from this terrestrial orb to my eternal home I will have no such difficulties with either passport or visa. My representative is already there, preparing for my arrival. As a citizen of heaven, my entrance is incontestable!

I want to say as did the Apostle, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing" [2 TIMOTHY 4:7, 8]. And I shall so speak if I am faithful now. Death is not the end; death is a beginning.

Across the tomb of every Christian can be written this glorious word, "Henceforth." Henceforth—something lies beyond this moment we call life. Henceforth—rewards await our entrance into the eternal home. Henceforth—I shall meet those who have turned to righteousness through my prayers and through my witness and through my pleas. Henceforth—I shall rejoice in the presence of my beloved dad, my godly granddad and praying grandma who pleaded with God for me and taught me the Word. Henceforth—how I wish I could tell you all that this means to the child of God. All I can do is testify that God who can do no wrong has promised good for me. These many years I have served Him He has done me no wrong, and surely He will show me grace and goodness even in giving me that crown of righteousness.

Oh, how true is the assertion of Sir Walter Scott, "**Death—the last sleep? No, it is the final awakening.**" **Death may be the king of terrors; but Jesus is the King of kings.**

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Paul challenged the Corinthian Christians to remember what he had taught them, and you and I need to remember all that is revealed in the Word, for there is eternal comfort in this Word. “Someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

“So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.

“It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

“I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’

“‘O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?’

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-57].

I want you to hear again a glorious passage that is not read often enough in this day. Paul, in what was arguably his earliest letter to the churches that is included in the canon of Scripture, encouraged the Thessalonians. “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].

WHEN DEATH HAS TAKEN MY LOVED ONE!

In the face of death we are offered divine comfort. Death is the last enemy, it is true; but because of the sacrifice of Christ our Lord and His resurrection from the dead, death is a defeated enemy. Death has become God's servant; it has become His chosen means of opening the door from this existence as He welcomes His child home. We who remain will feel sorrow because the familiar voice is no longer heard, the ministry that was once provided will be absent, the infectious smile and the twinkling eye will no longer be seen, but we know that our loved ones who die in the Lord are forever at home with Him.

Do you have this hope? If you do not have this hope is it because you have never been born from above and into the Family of God? You may have this hope, and the peace of God that is given with this hope, when you turn in faith to the Son of God. He died because of your sin and was raised to make you right with the Father. For this reason God in His Word testifies, "If you say it right out loud, 'Jesus is Lord,' believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. It is with the heart that one believes and is made right with God, and with the mouth one speaks openly and is set free." That passage concludes by offering life to all. "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved" [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].³

I pray you have this hope. I pray you are a Christian. I pray when the inevitable day comes that you are prepared to see the Master. I fully expect to see God, with my eyes. When we receive the life of Christ the Lord, we can say with confidence, "I am ready to see God face to face, for I am covered by the atoning blood." Amen.

³ Free translation provided by the author