

“He brushed his teeth twice a day—with fluoride. He saw his doctor twice a year. He slept with plenty of fresh air. He watched his diet and took his vitamins. He golfed, but never more than 18 holes at a time. He got at least 8 hours sleep every night. He never smoked, drank, nor lost his temper. He was set to live to be a hundred. His funeral will be held Monday. He is survived by 18 specialists, 4 medical institutions, 6 fitness centers, and numerous manufacturers of health foods and vitamins.”

Sometimes I think death is a surprise to all of us. We are masters at putting the thought out of our minds. We tiptoe around death as if ignoring it will make it go away. Others think it is just too morbid to think about. But our text for today reminds us of the stark reality: “*People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*” (Hebrews 9:27).

The first thing we can safely say is, “Death is inevitable.” Mark Twain once said the same thing this way, “This life is a losing proposition; nobody gets out of it alive.” Death happens all the time. It’s a statistical fact. No matter how we look at it we are going to die. It’s inevitable. Ultimately the death rate is 100 percent. We can try to postpone it, and we probably should. We can try to lessen its pain. And that too is good to a certain extent. We can try to deny its existence. But one thing is clear. We cannot escape death.

On average almost 2 people die every single second. Over fifty-five million people die in this world every single year—152,000 people per day. From the time this worship services starts to the time it stops, 6,316 people will have died. Dustin Hoffman, the Academy Award winning actor, amazed audiences with his creative characters in the movies *Tootsie* and *Rainman*. In an interview, Hoffman revealed his plans for the epitaph on his tombstone. He said it will read, “I knew this was going to happen.”

In this Scripture [we are] basically circling back for another view of scenery we have already surveyed in the book of Hebrews. One new and surprising feature, however, appears on the landscape: the announcement that Christ “*will appear a second time*” (9:28). Contrary to those mournful preachers who conjure up a picture of a wrathful and punitive Jesus coming back to kick sinners in the shins and take names, the preacher of Hebrews knows that Jesus’ return is good news indeed. There is no version of a famous Christmas tune is Hebrews 9: “Oh you better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I’m telling you why. Jesus Christ is coming again!” (Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*, p. 100)

His second coming is a coming again to make all that is wrong right. He’s not coming to fill a second term, like politicians reelected to office last Tuesday. His appearance will be like nothing we have seen before. His coming will mean the end of our natural lives, so what should our attitude toward his coming be? The book of Hebrews assures believers that Jesus did not enter into an earthly Temple. The Jerusalem Temple is only a copy of the true Temple in heaven. *Jesus entered heaven itself*, and there, on our behalf, he saw God’s face, “*appearing for us in God’s presence*” (v. 24). He did not have to do this many times as a Temple priest who comes yearly with an animal’s blood. If that was the case, Jesus would have been suffering from the beginning of the world. However, only ONCE did he show up in human life to annul our sin by his own costly sacrifice. Humans die once and face one judgment. So also Christ came ONCE to bear the burden of many sins (Isaiah 53:12), and he will show up a second time, but this time to rescue those who eagerly await him.

In the past month or so I have experienced death and dying no less than EIGHT times. And I'm not exaggerating. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote several books about dying, her most famous titled, *On Death and Dying*, was written in the year my father died. She was a Swiss-born psychiatrist, humanitarian, and co-founder of the hospice movement. She suggested that death is the natural end of life, and we should learn to accept it as such. But I've never been very comfortable with that view or easily accepted it. We were created to live.

Psalm 90 says, "*The years of our life are threescore and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away...So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom*" (Vss. 10 & 12). Revelation 14:13 says, "*And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth. Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'*"

The book *Tuesdays With Morrie* by Mitch Albom (New York: Doubleday, 1997, pp. 103-104) was an incredibly popular book about a mentor who was dying. At one point in the book, Morrie Schwartz says to Mitch: "Take any emotion—love for a woman, or grief for a loved one, or what I'm going through, fear and pain from a deadly illness. If you hold back on the emotions—if you don't allow yourself to go all the way through them—you can never get to being detached, you're too busy being afraid. You're afraid of the pain, you're afraid of the grief. You're afraid of the vulnerability that loving entails. But by throwing yourself into these emotions, by allowing yourself to dive in, all the way, over your head even, you experience them fully and completely..." Morrie stopped and looked over at Mitch, perhaps to make sure he was getting this right. "I know you think this is just about dying," he said, "but it's like I keep telling you. When you learn how to die, you learn how to live."

There is only one way to become expert in this topic, and that is to face our own dying. The Apostle Paul did that in Philippians. He described his dilemma saying he was hard pressed between his two choices. He could die and be with Christ, or stay and continue his ministry. Finally, he concluded in verse 21, "*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*" But in many other places in the Bible and in society, death is viewed as the ultimate enemy.

Woody Allen once said, "When I die, all I want is just a few of my good friends to gather around the casket, and do everything in their power to bring me back to life." Death is an enemy. It is a great Destroyer. Death takes all the aspirations of people, the dreams of their heart and the memories of the mind. Death severs the ties that bind a person to those they love. Death's work is relentless, cruel and merciless. Death *is* an enemy to be defeated. Death leaves sorrow, pain, loneliness, and unfulfilled dreams in its wake. I don't think we can accept it as a simple part of the human life cycle. Death is too destructive.

In 1 Corinthians 15:26 Paul says, "*The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*" Paul argues that death came into the world by the sin of Adam, but the life of Christ brought the Resurrection of the dead. In 2 Timothy 1:10, Paul says that Jesus Christ, "*abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*" And John the Apostle makes this wonderful promise in Revelation 21, that God, "*will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away*" (v. 4).

These Scripture verses are a wonderful affirmation that Christ has conquered death, and we do not have to fear death. But we must confess it's still a mystery. Many people struggle with a fear of death. In spite of our lack of understanding, we desire to affirm Jesus' victory over death. We want to have hope for life beyond this life. But we are still faced with the task of living.

John Killinger tells of a woman who was approaching the end. She said, "I am ready to go, but I am not ready to leave." She was a woman of faith. She had prepared herself, not with the inevitable stages of dying, but with the promise of the gospel. She was ready to go. But she also knew that it wasn't quite right. She wanted to *live*. So she wasn't ready to *leave*.

John Gunther's *Death Be Not Proud* tells about a boy who is diagnosed with brain cancer at the age of sixteen. Told from his father's point of view, the story is about his will to live and to learn. Johnny Gunther was a very intelligent young lad. He had always dreamed of going to Harvard University. During his fifteen months of cancer, Johnny was always enthusiastic about living. During his illness Johnny would always keep up with his schoolwork. He rarely complained. All he really cared about was making the last few months of his life worth living. When Johnny died it simply said on his tombstone, "Death, thou shalt DIE!" (from an Amazon.com review).

Howard Batson is the pastor of First Baptist Church, Amarillo, Texas. He says that death is like taking a long trip. At first, we are busy asking how much longer, how much farther. But then we relax and drift off to sleep in the back seat of the car. Then miraculously we wake up the next morning in our bed. How did it happen? When we arrived home, our daddy picked us up from the back of the car. He carried us to our room and gently laid us in bed. We woke up the next morning and we were at home. Death is something like that. Somewhere in the journey of life, we go to sleep. Our heavenly Father takes us in his arms and carries us to a place he has prepared for us. Because he lives, we will live also.

George Wesley Buchanan writes in his commentary, *To the Hebrews*, that "The Aaronic high priest entered 'the holy [precincts] made with hands,' but Jesus entered '*heaven itself*.' It is in heaven that Jesus appears '*for us in God's presence*.' The best the high priest could do was to send incense and fragrant smoke up to heaven in an attempt to placate God. But Jesus was an apostle, an ambassador, who could himself come directly before God to intercede for all believers" (p. 154).

At almost every funeral service I conduct I remind all those present of Jesus' words that he spoke on the night before his death: "*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 when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also.*" (John 14).

Jesus took the mystery out of death. We don't have to be afraid anymore. He experienced death. He emerged from it alive and said that we too will experience life after death in the kingdom of God.

And like him, one day we will "*enter heaven itself*." Amen.