

## Thoughts on Death: A Christian Perspective

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday after Pentecost, June 12, 1988. Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10; 14-17.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Two years ago my brother told us that he had cancer. The doctor gave him six months to live but he's still doing well. Several weeks ago my oldest sister was diagnosed as having inoperable cancer. Needless to say, I've been thinking a lot about death and mortality.

We are mortal. We have a normal life span of some eighty years, more or less. And then, in our seventies, eighties, nineties, we die, and this living body becomes lifeless and cold. Of course, not all of us live that long. Disease, accident or violence can take us out of this world prematurely. But eventually all of us will die and our body will disintegrate and return to the dust of the earth. When I was younger I didn't think much this, not even when my father died when I was 18. I knew that all humans are mortal, and that I was a human; and I could draw the logical conclusion. But it never struck home that I was mortal and that I would die one day. I didn't *feel* mortal. I felt strong and healthy. I could run a half mile in less than two minutes and stay up all night studying for exams. It was only as I approached forty that I became aware that I'm mortal.

Last year I took hospice training at the Southern Chester County Medical Center. One of the things that we did was get in touch with our own feelings about our mortality. The rationale for this is that it's presumptuous for counselors who've never thought of the inevitability of their ~~own~~ death to help terminally ill people prepare for *their* death. For that very purpose a "Personal Death Awareness" inventory has been developed. Here are some of the questions on it:

- ☐ How old do you think you'll be when you die?
- ☐ What do you expect to die from?
- ☐ If you had your choice, how would you want to die?
- ☐ What about dying do you fear: (1) Pain? (2) Progressive deterioration and disability? (3) Being left alone? (4) Receiving inadequate medical care?
- ☐ What do you most want to accomplish before your die?

Answering these questions was an uncomfortable experience. Despite my faith in Christ, thinking about my own death is a bit unsettling. It's unsettling because death seems so final. It's unsettling because I value having control over the circumstances of my life, and death is something very much out of my control. It's unsettling because though I've known many who've died, the actual experience of dying is, obviously, one I've never had. It's an unknown, and the unknown unsettles me.

Paul, however, wasn't unsettled when he spoke of his own death. He knew he was going to die but he was full of courage. He approached death with trust, assurance and confidence because he was convinced that death is not a period at the end of life, but a comma. Paul believed that death introduces us into a deeper and richer communion and fellowship with God. Death is like going home. As natural as it is to be reluctant to leave behind our physical existence on earth, as Christians we believe that the end of our life here is the necessary transition to the beginning of a new life in heaven. Heaven will be home. After living as nomads on earth in these tents of our body, our heavenly Father will welcome us with open arms to our eternal home where pain and heartache won't be remembered, and where we'll be able to enjoy an intimacy with God and with our loved ones that we never thought possible. If dying is like going home then

there's a point in my life where even the greatest things become, not insignificant, but less important. All of a sudden it seems less important whether I get a new car or put a new deck on the house.

As a young boy I saw the film, "A Night to Remember" the story of the sinking of the Titannic. One of the things I remember about that movie is that, near the end, some of the people in the life boats heard the doomed people still on board the Titannic singing as the great ship slid into the depths. "Nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee." They didn't sing, "Farther away are now the golden jewelry in my cabin, the treasures in the ship's safe, farther away are my loved ones at home." Rather they sensed that in death they were coming nearer to God.

It's not necessary to go down with a ship or to be mortally sick or to be on our last legs in order to make this affirmation, "Nearer, my God, to thee." We can begin to draw near to God in this life. We enjoy our families and loved ones, our home, the beauty of Springtime, the sound of music, beautiful scenery. It would be simply pride and pious snobbery to want to brush all this aside as worldliness. We certainly wouldn't be honoring the Giver of all good gifts, but rather offending him. But neither do we cling to these things and get caught in them. Instead, we find our way through these things to him who gives us all things, both good and painful. All of life is a drawing nearer to God for one who loves God.

Finally, death is an event for which we must be prepared. It's an event each of us /s preparing for every day, whether carefully or haphazardly. We must be prepared for death because, St Paul writes, "all of us must appear before Christ, to be judged by him." We have to come to grips with that undeniable theme of judgment in Christianity. One day my life will be shown up for what it is. There'll be no more games of hide and seek like

the one Adam tried to play in Paradise. Then I'll know what was really important in this life and what was trivial. I'll become aware of just how often I've neglected and ignored Christ. Then our Confession of Sin, which so easily becomes a formality, will become a heartfelt reality. Our one consolation is this: "We shall all appear before *Christ* to be judged by *him*." Not before the throne of some unknown chief-justice but in front of him who "died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but only for him who died and was raised to life for their sake."

How are you preparing for your death? Each time I think about my own death, I ask myself three questions?

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- ☐ Am I right in my relationship with God?
- ☐ Am I right in my relationships with my family, my friends, my co-workers? Are there relationships I need to reconcile? Are there words I need to say?
- ☐ Am I investing myself in things that will last for eternity?

I will someday die. I'll have to face death. It can't be prevented. But there's a great deal I can do, by God's grace, to prepare for it. And the time to begin healthy and earnest preparation is now. Amen.

Let us pray: Teach us, O God, to live as those who are about to die; and to die as those who are about to live; so that whether we live or die it may be unto you who are the Lord of life and death. We pray this in the name of the resurrected Christ and for his sake. Amen.