

4 Lent: Fearless Week Four: Fear of the End of Life

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Rev Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's

We continue our study of fears which can protect us from danger, but they can debilitate us. Fears can paralyze us, keeping us from accomplishing anything in life, or they can draw us closer to God. The fear we will tackle today is Fear of the End of Life. [Heavy theology, but worth it.]

Have you ever faced your own death head-on? Have you felt the fear of not knowing if you would be here tomorrow?

Ecclesiastes 7:4, *'A wise person thinks much about death, while the fool thinks only about having a good time now.'*

I can only relate to facing death in a small way.

I was nine or ten years old. It was springtime, and I was playing with my best friend along the street that we lived on. We were playing on a sidewalk, and discovered that the home owner had spread rock salt to melt the ice. My friend Randy ate some of the salt, and so did I. Later that day he called me on the telephone to tell me that what we ate was poison, and both of us were going to die. That was a long time ago, but I remember being scared to tell my parents, because I was afraid about how much trouble I would be in for killing myself, and I didn't want them to be worried about me. I remember walking outside as I waited for the end to come. I remember hearing the water gurgling under the thick sheets of ice that cover the shoulder of the roads during the big spring thaw. I remember being sorry for a few things I had messed up in my 10 year life. And I remember the fear. I remember the fear as I waited for some signs that the end was coming, and being frightened about what was going to happen.

It took me a couple of days to finally decide that the rock salt wasn't going to kill me. Do you fear death? Have you studied what God's Word says about death and the afterlife? There is a progression of understanding in Holy Scripture. And if you only read the OT, you get a very different understanding of death and the afterlife than you do in the NT. Let's take a look.

OT view of what happens at death; There are only vague references to a shadowy and unknown place named Sheol. At death, everyone's body went to the grave, everyone's soul went to Sheol.

An inter-testamental view of death is reflected in Luke 16:19-31 (The rich man and Lazarus). Sheol had two distinct levels; one being a level of conscious bliss, called Abraham's bosom, or paradise, reserved for the good person; and the other level being Hades, reserved for the evil person.

In Jesus' time, the Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife, and the Pharisees believed only in a spiritual resurrection.

The post resurrection NT view of death dramatically changed. It is based on Jesus' human resurrection, understood as a pledge of what will happen to all of us, eventually.

1 Peter 1:3, *'All honor to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for it is by his boundless mercy that God has given us the privilege of being born again. Now we live with a wonderful expectation because Jesus Christ rose again from the dead.'*

We are now in the times after Jesus' resurrection but before his coming again. When someone dies before Jesus' return, the souls of all believers of all time are immediately present with Christ.

Remember Christ on the cross. He said to the thief next to him, (**Luke 23:43**) *'I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.'*

The soul of the believer goes immediately to be with God, and the soul of the non-believer goes to suffer in Hades. There is not yet a bodily resurrection. That happens when Jesus comes back at the end of the age.

Christ's resurrected presence was witnessed by more than 500 people, including James, Peter, the rest of the twelve, and to Paul. His resurrected body was different from his earthly physical body. John 20:19 describes how Jesus passed through closed doors.

In 1 Cor 15:35ff, Paul stated that our resurrected body will be new and 'spiritual'. This new body will be raised above the limitations of the earthly

body; without illness, infirmity, or disability. Although it is a 'heavenly body, it will still be recognizable to people who know us.

1Thessalonians 4:13-18, *'And now, brothers and sisters, I want you to know what will happen to the Christians who have died so you will not be full of sorrow like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus comes, God will bring back with Jesus all the Christians who have died... The Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout... All the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. Then... we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and remain with him forever.'*

There is no reason for believers to fear the End of Life. When we die, Jesus has promised that our spirit is immediately with him, and filled with joy. At Jesus' return we also receive a new physical body. The believer is resurrected to life in heaven. The non-believer is resurrected to life in hell. And remember that Jesus is there as Advocate as that judgment is made by God.

There is another kind of death that we all experience, and it is important to include here. There are many smaller deaths we experience in life; the deaths of dreams or desires. Think about the plans you have had that you know will never work out. Think about the passions you have held to accomplish something, or travel somewhere, or to experience, that will probably never happen. How do you deal with that reality? Christ has a response for you.

Consider the parable Jesus tells of the Prodigal Son. He left his father to chase his dream (representing someone leaving God). He wanted to be on his own, answer to no one, and live strictly for his own pleasure. In the end, he discovered that **something even better** than his dream was waiting for him; being unconditionally loved and accepted. But he had to be ready to accept it; he had to be ready to appreciate it.

When you experience the small death of a dream, or you approach the end of life, there is no need to fear; but let it make your faith in God even stronger; be patient for God to show you what He is going to do. At the death of some of our dreams, or at the end of our life, I expect to hear God

say, 'You were dead and are alive again; you were lost and now you are found.' Amen.

The Reflection Verse for this week is John 14:1-3, *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.'*