

THE FEAR OF DEATH – Phil. 1:21-26

Facing our Fears #2

Johann Farina was startled from his sleep by the rapping on the door of his dry goods store. It was 2:00 in the morning- who in the world would be knocking on his door now? As Johann staggered with sleepy eyes toward the door, and then pulled back the curtain, he saw a French Soldier standing at his door. What would bring a French soldier to the door of a dry goods store in a city in Western Germany in the middle of the night? *It is for the potion, the Frenchman stammered, struggling with the German language as best he could. Back in camp, one of my comrades is very ill- it might even be the Black Death. I have heard that you sell a potion that protects those yet unaffected from the plague. We want to buy some because we are all afraid of dying.*

Johann nodded. Yes, he and his brother who had moved from Italy in 1709 and had started this dry goods store had indeed invented a potion from a secret formula. Many believed that if you put it on your skin it would provide protection from getting the plague. Johann got a bottle of the potion for the soldier, and he was on his way back to camp into the blackness of the night.

Many came at various times to the Farina store to secure a bottle of that secret potion. They all came because of their fear of death. They came in hope that somehow this secret formula would provide protection for them. They came from France, Prussia, Austria- even as far away as England and Sweden and Russia. And they never went away empty-handed, because the Farina brothers always had a bottle available for them to take away.

What was originally created as medicine to ward off the plague and help those who were obsessed with a fear of death has survived the centuries to this very day. But today, nobody would claim any medicinal value to the Farina's secret antidote to the plague of Black Death. In fact, today the potions that have multiplied in variety are actually used to attract rather than repel. But the fact remains that these potions were originally used to ward off disease because of people's fear of dying. The potion that the Farina brothers invented? That secret formula that they named after the city where their dry goods store was located in West Germany? Today we still call it cologne.

History is filled with examples illustrating people's fear of death and their desire to avoid it at all costs. From a lifetime spent in continuous search for the elusive fountain of youth, to the more modern day approach of freeze drying the deceased body in hopes that a cure will be found one day, people have continuously displayed their fear of death. As Francis Bacon once said, *Men fear death as children fear to go into the dark.*

Now we all realize that a balanced aversion to death is very normal and is actually a God created desire within each living person. God created each of us with an inner drive to live. This principle of life preservation

is what motivates the shipwrecked sailor to spend weeks in the life raft without giving up until he is rescued, it is what kept thousands of prisoners of war alive until the war ended and they could return back to their families again, and on a much less dramatic scale, this drive for life preservation is what keeps us pressing on during those down periods in life. This is God created and good. When a person comes to the place where he seeks death in a suicidal manner, we recognize this emotional state to be an abnormal one that requires professional help.

And this normal aversion towards death can be helpful for it causes us to evaluate the value of life and reprioritize our goals as we are faced with the imminent nature of death. Most people settle into a routine of life that doesn't think much about death until some dramatic event occurs. Perhaps it is the death of a loved one or close friend. Perhaps it is the untimely death of some celebrity. Perhaps it is a terrorist attack or a hurricane. It was interesting to compare the covers of 2 back-to-back issues of People Magazine. The cover of the magazine in September preceding the terrorist attack on the twin towers on September 11, 2001 was filled with pictures of celebrities with the lead story being the best and worst dressed celebrities of the year. The cover of People magazine the next week following the events of 9-11 presented a stark image of the World Trade Center explosion. One event occurred where people were brought face to face with the brevity of life and the imminent nature of death and suddenly the clothing that Hollywood actors chose to wear didn't seem that critical anymore. So an awareness of the nature of life and death is a good thing for it helps us to maintain a proper perspective.

But while a natural aversion to death is very normal and healthy and can bring about good results, we must also realize that God did not intend for His children to live under the burden of an obsessing fear of death as many are today. God does not desire for His children to be terrorized by terrorists. God did not create His children to dread growing older. Growing old is a natural process of life. God did not create us to spend the entire of our lives striving against that which is inevitable in the end. In fact, despite the fact that the Bible recognizes death as man's last great enemy, God has given to his children all the resources needed to release them from the fear of death.

If anyone could have been terrorized by a fear of dying it might have been the Apostle Paul in that Roman jail as he was writing his letter to the church at Philippi. When you were in a Roman prison, the future of your life was certainly in question. While Rome did have a legal system of law and order that brought stability to the empire, the Roman justice system was certainly much more arbitrary than we would be used to today. It was basically a conversation between King Agrippa and Governor Festus back in Israel that had sent Paul to Rome in the first place. Paul couldn't have had a great deal of confidence concerning his future career as he was sitting in this prison in Rome. One Roman decision-maker who had suffered a negative experience

with some Christian and Paul's life could well be over. We could understand the Apostle being quite apprehensive over death and fearful that his life might soon be coming to an end. But this is not the Paul that we see through the Epistle of Philippians, is it? In the first chapter of this letter, we see a man who is undaunted by the prospect of his imminent death. In fact, we could go so far as to say we see a man torn – torn between a natural desire to go on living here on this earth and what should be the natural desire of a Christian to enter his eternal home in heaven.

What allowed Paul to have such complete victory over the fear of death during such an unsettling and troubling time in his life? Paul reveals to us 3 lessons that he had learned that helped him gain victory over the fear of death in this passage. I would like to look with you at these 3 lessons this morning.

First, Paul had learned what Life is all about. *For me to live is Christ* he wrote in Phil. 1:21a.

In these 6 brief words, the Apostle Paul cuts to the heart of what life is all about just like a surgeon's scalpel slicing to the core of a physical problem. The fears of most people in life start with confusion about what life is really all about in the first place.

The 3 goals that most people center their lives around are health, wealth and success. If a person has vibrant health, youthful vitality, and a winsome reputation then that person is really living. *If you have your health, you have everything*, we so often hear people saying. We need to recognize that this is not a true statement. While health is certainly important to us, it is not the heart of life. And if we think that it is we will not be able to cope with the aging process and eventually with death itself. Have you ever noticed that very few people are healthy when they die? Of course we are going to have an intense fear of death if our motto is *For me to live is health*.

So many others spend their entire life amassing material goods. They save and invest, they carefully maintain all that they buy and they amass quite an impressive portfolio of assets by the time they retire. Now again, there is nothing wrong with owning material things. Every one of us owns material things – the only difference is in the degree of wealth. And God commends the person who plans ahead for his future. But then death comes along and everything that has been accumulated in life has to be left behind to be fought over by relatives that suddenly appear. We are going to battle the fear of death if our motto is *For me to live is wealth*.

Still others feel that if they are only successful enough, if only they become famous, if only enough people know their names, then they will really achieve what life is all about. So they spend their time and energies trying to get a break, trying to make it big. Most never do – but in a sense, they might be the more fortunate ones because they at least can continue to cling to the dream that if they did become successful they would find contentment. But the few who truly do become successful find how fleeting that fame really

is. If I were to ask who the MVP of the Super Bowl was just year ago probably few would be able to recall his name. We are going to have a continuous battle with the fear of death if our life motto is *For me to live is success*.

The Christian who studies God's word realizes that humans were originally created by a Sovereign and Loving God for the purpose of having fellowship with Him. After God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden, He walked with them daily, talking with them, enjoying their company. After sin entered the world separating the human race from a holy and righteous God, there was a divine plan formed so that fellowship could be restored. That plan centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ, the second person of the triune godhead who would become the Messiah, the deliverer of sinful people. Christ was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life and voluntarily gave Himself on the cross of Calvary to pay the debt that the human race owed to God because of sin. It is through Christ that we can once again find the purpose of our creation. It is through Christ that we can once again know fellowship with God. It is through Christ that we can once again know true living. The Apostle Paul learned that truth. *For me to live is Christ*, he wrote. Paul realized the true nature of life as God has designed it. Learning this lesson is important for all of us if we are to conquer the fear of death.

But Paul also had learned what death is all about. Listen to Phil. 1:21-24 again:

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

To die is gain, Paul says. That's what death is – an advantage, a promotion, a profit to me. I am convinced that most people who have a morbid fear of death fail to see the true nature of death. Now we can understand why an unbeliever would fear death. This is only natural and should be expected. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God in judgment. A person who doesn't have the confidence of forgiven sins and fellowship with God but has chosen to live as God's enemy here on earth would naturally fear the prospect of coming before God in judgment. Hebrews 9:27 says that it is the destiny of every person to die and after this the judgment. But for a Christian to be obsessed with a fear of death reveals a misconception of what death is all about.

When a young man or woman enlists in one of the branches of our armed forces, he or she is sent to boot camp. It is in boot camp that physical conditioning is achieved, it is in boot camp that the military philosophy is ingrained, it is in boot camp that the foundation is laid so that the soldier can then be trained in

a specialty area in the future. Now there are friendships born in boot camp, but generally boot camp is tough, it is a grueling, there is a lot of pain and suffering. But boot camp is necessary for a successful military program. One of the most joyous days in the life of a soldier is that day when he graduates from boot camp. Friends and relatives often come to join in the celebration. Can you imagine a soldier coming to that time of graduation from boot camp with sorrow and depression? I can't. The soldier is happy to graduate from boot camp and move to the next level leaving the physical rigors and suffering behind.

So it is with death for the Christian. For the one who knows the Lord Jesus Christ, death is a promotion, a graduation, a gain as Paul describes it. This life at its best is still filled with much sorrow and suffering and pain. Even the best life is hard. But there is coming a day when all suffering will become just a distant memory. Death is that time of graduation for the Christian. As the Apostle Paul was sitting in that Roman prison, is it any wonder that he was torn in his mind as he considered the possibility of an upcoming death? You see, Paul saw death as it actually is. While many see death as loss – loss of all the material goods accumulated, loss of health, etc. – Paul saw death as gain. Paul saw death as a graduation, as a promotion, as a crowning achievement.

Finally, Paul not only had learned what life was all about and what death was all about, but he also had learned what service was all about. The Apostle's train of thought turns as he begins to think of God's purpose for him here on this earth. So he writes to these dear believers:

²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

For many, the goal of life is to be served. The person who gets the most people to serve him is the most successful. So the model is the wealthy heiress who has people waiting on every single one of her needs. She never cooks a meal – her chef does that. She never makes her bed or vacuums the carpet – her housekeeper does that. She doesn't even have to open her own car door – her chauffeur does that. The person who is most constantly served is seen as most successful in this world. But then, as with everyone, death comes to knock at her door. And she can't buy his way out of this one; she can't get anyone to serve her here; she must face death by herself, all alone. So she fears death with a passion.

Jesus Christ came to model a different way of life. He boldly stated that he did not come to be served but rather to serve others and to give His life as a ransom for many. And He called disciples to follow Him in a life of service for others. **Jesus Christ did not fear his own death because His death represented the greatest service that could ever be offered.** And He taught His followers not to fear death because death for them

would be the vehicle to bring them to great reward and blessing. The Apostle Paul didn't fear death. Death represented great gain to him. Death would relieve him of his physical sufferings and imprisonment. Death would usher Him into the presence of the Lord to receive great rewards. In fact, as Paul thought about all of the advantages of death he was torn between this life and the next. But then he thought of the mission that God had given to him. Paul thought of the people God had called him to serve. As Paul learned what life was all about, as he learned what death was all about and as he learned what service was all about, the Apostle found new strength and courage to face even death without fear.

In a speech Albert Schweitzer once said to a group of students, *I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.* Those were likely the wisest words that those students ever heard throughout their entire education.

When Isaac was 16 years of age, he came up to his father one day complaining about the songs that were sung in church. *Church hymns were boring,* Isaac said. *They were too old-fashioned, too slow, too far behind the times.* Now this is not that unusual for there has often been a generational gap in musical tastes historically. But this would become a critical moment in Isaac's life for if his father would have responded by joining in the criticism, Isaac could have been permanently turned off to the church. But his father wisely told Isaac that if he didn't like the hymns that were sung in church, he should just write some new ones. Isaac went up to his room that night and composed his first hymn. By the time he was done, Isaac Watts would compose almost 350 hymns, many that we are still singing today. *Joy to the World* – a Christmas favorite – is his. *Oh, God Our Help in Ages Past, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, Jesus Shall Reign, At the Cross?* – they are all his hymns that are in our hymnals. We have 11 of Isaac Watts' hymns in the hymnal that we use here in our church. The first song that we sang to start our worship service, *I Sing the Mighty Power of God,* was written by Isaac Watts.

But something else happened as Isaac dedicated his life in service to others to help other Christians better express themselves in praise to the Lord. His own life began to change. Whereas he would never be robust and strong in his health, his attitude towards death changed dramatically. He began to look forward to heaven. He didn't have a fear of death that so many of his neighbors had. Listen to these words of one of the popular hymns that he authored:

Come we that love the Lord and let our joys be known. Join in a song with sweet accord and thus surround the throne.

The hill of Zion yields a thousand sacred sweets. Before we reach the heavenly fields or walk the golden streets.

Then let our songs abound and every tear be dry. We're marching thro' Immanuel's ground to fairer worlds on high.

We're marching to Zion. Beautiful, beautiful Zion; we're marching upward to Zion, that beautiful city of God.

Another hymn that Isaac Watts composed was Am I a Soldier of the Cross? Am I a soldier of the cross? A follower of the Lamb? And shall I fear to own His cause or blush to speak His name? Must I be carried to the skies on flow'ry beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed thru bloody seas? Are there no foes for me to face, must I not stem the flood? Is this vile world a friend to grace to help me on to God? Sure I must fight if I would reign – Increase my courage Lord! I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, supported by Thy word!

Do you know what life is really about this morning? Can you say with the Apostle Paul that your relationship with Christ is really the central goal of your life?

Do you know what death is all about this morning? Will your death be gain to you, gaining heaven as your home and blessings and rewards from God at the judgment seat?

Are you serving others with your life? How is your life contributing to the well-being of others?

If you have learned that to live is Christ, if you have learned that to die is gain, and if you have learned the importance of a life of service to others, death need not be a fearful prospect for you – you needn't be enslaved by a fear of death.