

Dying with Jesus

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Introduction.

- A. Of all the fears that move us, perhaps the most important is the fear of death. For folks my age, this is a fairly abstract idea, but as we get older, it becomes more and more concrete. I was particularly struck by this during singing school. Many of my friends in the hymn writing world are moving into their fifties, and where before they hardly ever talked about health, now it's becoming an important topic of conversation. They've started eating healthier, taking blood pressure and cholesterol medications, and bemoaning their physical condition because they don't want to keel over in ten years just like their parents did. It's fear.
- B. This fear of death is so ingrained in us that we marvel at those who choose to die. We mourn the tragic decision of the suicide, and we wonder at the courage of the soldier who gives his life for his country or of the mother who gives her life for her child. Those things just aren't part of the way we normally think.
- C. When we read God's word, though, we learn that death is one of its central concepts, and indeed, that as Christians, every one of us is expected to die for our faith. In one form or another, death is something we are commanded to embrace not once but several times. How can this be? How can we reconcile ourselves to these self-erasing changes that God demands? Let's look at this, then, what it means to die with Jesus.

I. In Salvation from Sin.

- A. The first place that death is required of us is in our salvation from sin. The Biblical metaphor here is a complex one. To begin with, God considers every one of us in our normal state to be dead in our sins. Sure, we're still wandering around with a semblance of life, but because of our sins, we're really just dead men walking. We're just waiting for the sentence to be pronounced for the crimes the Judge already knows we have committed.
- B. Just like a criminal who dies while on death row will no longer be executed, the only way that we can avoid the death penalty for our sins is by dying before the Day of Judgment. Paul tells us how this can take place in Galatians 2:19-20. We have to die spiritually to our sins, and the way this is accomplished is when we are crucified with Christ. When this takes place, our old man of sin dies with Him on the cross, and the resurrection of the dead that Christ receives lives on in us. Our guilt is gone, and we become alive in Him.
- C. Those are the spiritual terms of what takes place in our first death, but Galatians 2 doesn't make clear what actual physical process needs to happen. We see Paul define this part in his words in Romans 6:3-6. In all Scripture, only one action is said to raise men from the dead, and that action is baptism. When we are baptized, buried in water just as Christ was buried in the heart of the earth, that symbolically unites us with His death, and then, when we are taken up out of the water, that unites us with His resurrection. Anybody who doesn't go through that process of immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins is not saved. No matter how much they believe, no matter what prayers they pray, no matter what church they go to, they are still dead. We must understand that for ourselves, and we must make sure that those around us understand it too.

II. In Christian Living.

- A. Once we have done that, though, once we undergo this death for our salvation, we are automatically expected to undergo another death, the death of Christian living. Now, to a new Christian or someone who isn't one at all, that sounds incredibly ominous, as though we become zombies or something like that. Paul explains what's really going on in this kind of death in the same context, in Romans 6:11-13.
- B. Although this living death isn't creepy, it still demands a great deal from us. In fact, it demands everything. Paul tells us that once we become Christians, we are to consider ourselves as dead to sin. That means that all of those evil things that we used to love to do when we were still sinners, the things that some part of us still wants to do, are things that we have to leave behind. Nor is it enough that we just become neutrals. Instead, we have to count ourselves as alive to righteousness. The good works that the word records are now what we need to spend our days doing. We aren't living for ourselves anymore. We're living for God instead.
- C. Now, this likewise sounds fairly ominous. God is telling us, "Take a whole bunch of stuff you enjoy and quit it cold turkey." How in the world can we manage that? Paul gives us a hint in Galatians 5:24-25. Notice that Paul doesn't say that we need to crucify the flesh with its actions. Instead, he tells us that we need to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. You see, friends, we can fight against sin all we want, but until we kill off the part of us that wants to sin, we're fighting a losing battle. The Bible tells us in James 1 that it's lust that brings forth sin, and as long as we allow the lust to remain in our heads, it's like chopping the head off a dandelion plant and hoping that will kill the dandelion. Nope. In just a week or two, the dandelion will be back, just as healthy as ever, and if we don't uproot lust from our lives, the sin will come right back too.
- D. Right here, friends, is where a lot of folks start digging in their heels. They start saying, "You want me to change the way I THINK? No way! I can't do that!" The problem is that our culture has trained us to believe

that we can't improve ourselves into different people, and it's much easier to be lazy and accept that belief than to put in the work required to dig some lust out of our minds. The fact of the matter is, though, that human beings are much more flexible than that. If we are determined enough, and if we lean on God enough, we can shape ourselves into everything that He wants us to be. It's not easy, but it is certainly possible.

- E. We see another important element of this death to sin in our lives described in 1 Corinthians 15:31. Here, Paul tells us that in his service to Christ, he dies daily. We need to learn to die with the same frequency. We need to learn to making a daily commitment to getting those deadly lusts out of our lives and being like Jesus.
- F. Otherwise, we will never get anywhere spiritually at all. It reminds me a little bit, actually, of something I see as I help teach the hymnwriting class. It's been a part of the singing school for about ten years now, and there are some students who have been returning for a number of those years. They pay their \$500, they sit in the class all week, they write a verse or two, then, they go home, and for the other 51 weeks a year, they do absolutely nothing hymn-related. The next year, they come back, and guess what? They're not any better than they were last year, because they haven't made a consistent effort to become better.
- G. Sadly, there are all too many Christians who are that same way. They come to church once a week, or once every couple of weeks, and during the two hours of the Sunday morning service, they do a wonderful job of dying to the lusts of the flesh. They feel like they've accomplished something spiritually, but then, they go home, and they don't even bother trying to apply what they've learned. It's like they expect righteousness to happen by osmosis, like they've just absorbed it by being around other Christians for two hours. Then, they're disappointed, because they find themselves struggling with the same problems and the same sins that marked their spiritual lives ten years ago. Brethren, the problem with Christians like that is that they aren't dying daily. They want the results, but they don't want the constant work, and they aren't doing it. Let's be better than that, friends. Let's fight to share in the mind of Christ not just here in the assembly, but always.
- H. I'm going to be straight with you now. This is not an easy thing we're talking about here. This is not something that just anybody is going to do, but it is necessary that we do it. Paul explains why in Romans 8:12-13. Just like so many things in this sermon have been, this too is a matter of life and death. The salvation that we were talking about in the first point isn't something we can buy, but it is something that will cost us. Once we allow the blood of Christ to cleanse us, we are forever in His debt. We owe Him not just our lives, but our souls, and He expects us to do what we can to make good on it. If we try to claim His salvation but then go off and live however we want to, we're going back on our obligations, and He will hold us to account for that. Nor is it any slap of the wrist that the backsliding child of God will encounter in the judgment. Instead, our choice to live according to the flesh will cost us our souls. Our choice then boils down to "Die now, or die later," and if the price for dying now is steep, the price for dying later is unimaginable. Let's be wise. Let's put to death the deeds of the body, so that all of us can share in the life of the spirit.

III. In Physical Death.

- A. Finally, though, the last place we die with Jesus is in literal, physical death. This is a natural consequence of the first two deaths. If we die with Christ to the sins of the old man and die daily in Him to the lusts of our minds, if the Lord does not return before our bodies give out, dying with Him is where we will find ourselves. Let's consider Paul's comments on this subject in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14. In context, here's what was going on. The church in Thessalonica had recently suffered the death of some of its members, and the survivors were wondering what would happen to those who had died. Paul here is writing to reassure them. He tells them that they don't have to mourn like those who have no hope, because they do have hope.
- B. And friends, that hope is one of the big reasons why I'm a Christian. It's part of the nature of being a preacher, I suppose, that I spend a lot of time by sickbeds, deathbeds, and caskets, and I can't ever consider a dead person without wondering about the time when I myself will die. Lord willing, that will be a number of years in the future, but if the natural world continues, it will be certain. Friends, when that day comes when I'm the one in the deathbed instead of beside it, I don't want to be dying without hope. I want to know. I want to know that there will be something for me after this hunk of flesh I'm in draws its last breath, that just as God brought Jesus to Him again, so God will bring me. I want to know that I'm falling asleep in Jesus.
- C. We see the reason why this is so absolutely, life-alteringly critical in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. Sure, when that day comes, everybody's going to be raised, all right, but only those who have died in Christ are going to know the resurrection of life. The only other alternative is going to be the resurrection of judgment, and believe me, those who face that resurrection would be much better off if they just stayed dead. If I die in Christ, though, I have nothing to fear from my face-to-face encounter with God. He'll welcome me, not because I'm such a wonderful person, but because of the grace of the Lord whom I serve. Then, He'll take me home with Him forever, to the place where I can be with Him and with His Son. For Christians, death is just a nap. God has promised and we can be certain that we will wake again, to a life far better than any we have ever known. That's what it means to fall asleep in Jesus: to go to sleep not with despair, but with hope.

Conclusion. If you want that hope of life in Jesus for yourself, you can claim it now.