

“Death and Life”

Based on the book *“We Make the Road by Walking”* by Brian D. McLaren, Chapter
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Texts: Philippians 1: 20-30 and Luke 20: 27-38

If there is one topic most people avoid it is death. We don't want to think about it, we don't want to talk about it, heck, we don't want to do it! We all know death is inevitable, but we have so many fears, so many questions, so many worries, and so much to deal with. There's the finances, the medical directives, funeral plans, burial plans... Will I donate my organs or my body to someone in need or for study? Do I want a funeral? At church or somewhere else? What kind of songs do I want played if I have a funeral? And this is just the tip of the iceberg! Meanwhile, there is also fear, most of it unnamed, about what will happen when we die? Do we enter some kind of heavenly courtroom to receive divine judgement? Will God preside, St. Peter, Jesus? Is there a big logbook of everything I've done that will be used to determine whether I go through the so-called “pearly gates” or to the “pits of hell”? How will they know? How will I know? What will happen when I die?

All of these questions and I haven't even scratched the surface of what people think about related to their own demise, or that of a loved one. All I know is this: there is a lot of fear out there and most, if not all of it, is unfounded. I'm thankful to Brian McLaren, the author of the book we've been studying as a church not only for bringing up death, but for the way he talks about it. This is a good chapter and I hope this message, based on his, will help make death less fearful in every way.

When it comes to things of this world, I may not be the best person to advise you. You need a lawyer, financial planner, or other such people to help you figure out your last wishes related to your financial assets, trusts, wills, living wills, powers of attorney and such things. All I can say from years of ministry experience and experience now as a son of aging parents, please see those professionals to help you manage the financial and legal aspects of your demise. Don't put it off! It's so important to those you care about who want to help you. If they don't know, they can't do what you desire, and further, without clear instructions they often can't do what they know you want. Don't assume you'll have your mind until the day you pass as many before you have not been blessed in that way.

I can help you sort out some of the other “earthly” things of passing away: funeral planning, moral and ethical issues about organ donation, sorting out some family dynamics before you see the attorney and so forth. Again, the more you plan now, the easier it is for those who love you and want the best for you. It really is hard to care for someone when you have no idea their wants, needs, or desires. Let me know if you want that help. Of course, Rokko may be your best source to talk about music!

Dealing with these “earthly” issues will do so much not only for those who follow you, but I believe it will aid in your fear of dying in ways you cannot imagine. Wouldn’t it be nice to know that if you can’t do it, someone can? It can remove a lot of worry.

Honestly, though, people seem more scared about the “other-worldly” aspects of dying: this heaven and hell thing really has people worked up, for example. McLaren is so helpful here, “Here’s a way to think about death. We often speak of God as the one who was, who is, and who is to come. The God who *was* holds all our past. The God who *is* surrounds us now. And the God who *is to come* will be there for us beyond this life as we know it. With that realization in mind, death ***could never mean leaving God, because there is nowhere we can***

escape from God's presence (emphasis mine), as the Psalmist tells us in Psalm 139:7." Here's what it says: Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? We can **never, not ever** leave God's presence. Does that frighten or uplift you? Your answer to that question says a lot about your fears about death.

For some people, seeing God at the point of death is frightening. They've heard many a fire-and-brimstone pastor tell them about *judgement day*, and it scares the hell into them...not out of them, but into them. Don't raise your hand, but how many of us still to this day, with or without a fire-and-brimstone pastor **still** wonder whether we're going to heaven? McLaren adds, "Through death, we join God in the vast, forever-expanding future, into which both present and past are forever taken up." The key word? We **join** God. McLaren has an even better way to say what I'm trying to tell you: "On the other side, we can expect to experience as never before the unimaginable light or energy of God's presence. We will enter into a **goodness so good, a richness so rich, a holiness so holy, a mercy and love so strong and true that all of our evil, pride, lust, greed, resentment, and fear will be instantly melted out of us** (emphasis mine)." Not done yet, "We will at that moment more fully understand how much we have been forgiven, and so we will more than ever be filled with love...love for God

who forgives, and with God, love for everyone and everything that has like us been forgiven.”

We’re still not done! “We can expect to feel a sense of reunion—yes, with loved ones who have died, but also with our great-great-great-great-grandparents and our thirty-second cousins a thousand times removed whose names we’ve never known but to whom we are in fact related...And that relatedness won’t stop with human beings but will expand infinitely outward to all of God’s creation. We can expect to feel the fullest, most exquisite sense of oneness and interrelatedness and harmony—a sense of belonging and connection that we approached only vaguely or clumsily in our most ecstatic moments in this life. Wait, say that again, you mean that death could bring about a belonging and connection that we approach only vaguely or clumsily in our MOST ECSTATIC moments in this life? Death is somehow related to ecstasy? Whoa!

Now I hear many of you saying but wait...I heard...someone say...that we better prepare to meet our maker. Are you saying that’s wrong? Nope. Just saying it’s not scary, or mean, or judgmental, or hate-filled, or hellish, or anything evil, sad, hurtful, or icky. No, instead, prepare to meet our God and experience ecstasy in a way you never had, belonging like you never had, love like you never

experienced, hope you could never imagine, and welcome like the Prodigal Son on steroids. God made you, God loves you, God wants the best for you, God forgives you, God simply can't be God without you. Yes, you matter to God that much! Not only when you die, but now, too! You don't have to wait to die to matter to God, but at the same token you don't have to think that death is some kind of gauntlet trail when you finally find out if you "made it" or not! It'll be so good (am I over selling it here?) that "what has been suffered and lost will feel weightless compared to the substance that has been gained (McLaren, 251)"

Why am I saying all of this? Well, a couple reasons. First, I'm tired of poor, pseudo-biblical theology that only gets part of the story at all, let alone getting it right. Many Christian pastors have led people to believe that God will "get you in the end" while at the same time preaching about a God of love, mercy, and compassion...a God who, from the cross pronounced, "Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

Now some of you I know are worried that this kind of welcome will get people believing that it doesn't matter what they do in this world. Couldn't be further from the truth, but that's a whole another sermon or three. What I am saying is that fear of retributive justice (if you don't know what that means, see

last week's sermon) on the part of God is simply no way to live. God doesn't want your service, your adoration, your praise given only out of fear. That would be ingenuine. Imagine loving somebody only because you fear them. That, frankly, is insane. And yet, this is the God we've shared for many a generation. And it's time we stop. Ask so many in the New Testament about whether God (whom we Christian know as Jesus) is a spiteful, judgmental, condemning, hurtful man. I think you'll agree that the OVERWHELMING evidence in the New Testament (I actually believe in the Old one, too) is of a God of grace, a God of mercy, and most of all a God of inclusive love. Judgment is reserved primarily for the Pharisee and Sadducees who represent way too much of today's Christianity. And that's the kind of God I want to spend eternity with. I don't know about you but spending eternity with someone who I only obeyed out of fear doesn't sound much like "heaven" to me!

Time to calm down. This just gets me every time. I don't know about every pastor, but I represent the God of Grace and the God of Glory who pours power down on God's people, not using power to destroy them.

Instead, McLaren reminds us that "...if we allow the Spirit to prepare us for dying by contemplating it in these ways, we can begin to understand the dual pull

that [the Apostle] Paul wrote about: 'For me to live is Christ, but to die is gain.

On the one hand, we feel a pull to stay here in this life, enjoying the light and love and goodness of God with so many people who are dear to us, with so much good work left to be done. On the other hand, we feel an equal and opposite pull toward the light and love and goodness of God experienced more directly beyond this life...And as we walk this road, we not only remember the past, but we also anticipate the future, which is described as a great banquet around God's table of joy. When you pass from this life, do not be afraid. You will not pass into death. You will pass through death into a greater aliveness still – the banquet of God. Trust God, and live."

Trust God and live. That sounds much better than that other stuff. Trust God. Live your life to the fullest. Try, best as you can, to get that fear out of your life. It's your fear that is robbing you of life. Throw it away. Trust God. Live your life to the fullest.

Amen and amen.