

## THE CHRISTIAN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD DEATH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 3, 1966 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

George Bernard Shaw, the famous British playwright and wit, while commenting on the subject of death, once said, "The universal statistic is the same: one out of one does." In our world nothing is more common than death. There is never an issue of our newspapers which does not carry the announcement of the death of some of our fellow citizens. Usually the front page will tell us of the death of some prominent citizen of our land or of other lands. Sometimes the story is of a catastrophe such as an earthquake, a tornado, or war which has taken a number of lives. Then, regularly the obituary pages tell of many others who have come to the end of their lives.

There is a strange phenomenon in reference to death. However, for in spite of the widespread occurrence of death people of our generation try to act as if death were non-existent. Death is not discussed in polite society today. It is a forbidden subject. This age has been called a death-denying age. Death appears to be so disturbing to many people that they push it down out of sight for as long as possible. Man is the only creature who knows he must die and yet he is trying desperately it seems to forget this fact.

### Evidences

There are a number of evidences of modern man's efforts to forget that he must die. For example, there is the great emphasis upon youth. Among men, there is the practice of reliving their youth by participation in spectator sports, seeing younger men do what they once were able to do but can no longer do. Many men try to look and act young in various ways. Psychologists have even pointed out that the buying of impractical sports cars is an effort to appear young and dashing. Among women, the use of cosmetics is a similar indication of trying to forget the impact of age. The dyeing of hair is one such practice. Actually, several industries have arisen to try to make women look younger than they are.

When death eventually comes, unlike in other generations, it usually takes place in a hospital rather than at home. In other years death came for the average person in the confines of his own home, which meant that the entire family was sent and even the children were near by. Today death comes in a hospital and even the family is often not present. Many adults have never seen a person die. This generation, more than previous generations, arranges for the funerals to come as quickly as possible and to be as brief as possible. Often they are private and usually they are as unobtrusive as can be arranged. Ministers often contribute to this general feeling with a rather impersonal funeral sermon. We make the dead look as alive as possible and even as young as possible before burying them. Even our cemeteries are made to look like parks, with the modern tendency to do away with the monuments and to replace them with bronze markers,

Still another evidence that suggests that people of our day wish to avoid any thought of death is the way that we handle grief. We minimize it as much as possible. We turn the conversation to something else. We make an effort to "cheer up" the bereaved.

### The Result

The result of all this is the very common reaction when death comes to a family, "You never think it will happen to you." This is the most common reaction of all of the whole range of responses to death. Because death has been kept hidden and has been so little discussed it is deeply disturbing when it does come and even sometimes causes traumatic experiences.

Recently, I have been in two different groups of doctors when they have discussed the question of whether to tell a dying patient that he is about to die. It constitutes a real problem to the conscientious doctor, for although he wants to be absolutely honest with his patients, he has learned that to tell a person that his life expectancy is very short often brings on an emotional upset which hastens death. The consensus in both these discussions seemed to be that it is best to avoid telling a patient that he is about to die unless asked by the patient. Even, then it may be that the doctor will evade a direct answer until he is pressed for such an answer. As I listened to these discussions my own conclusion was that there are some things that we who preach need to say before the doctor faces this particular problem. We need to say some things about death, as it is discussed in the New Testament, in order that people will not feel an emotional upset when death approaches.

### Not the Supreme Tragedy

Accordingly, I would ask the question, "What is the teaching of the scriptures concerning death?" As one reads the Bible he is made to realize that death is not the supreme tragedy. In fact, often it is not a tragedy at all. To the Corinthian church, whose members were concerned about death and the resurrection Paul wrote, "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We all shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this corruptible shall

have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (I Cor. 15:50-55). In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul added, "Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens." (II Cor. 4:16-5:1).

In writing to the Thessalonians Paul went still further, "But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep; that ye sorrow not, even as the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep. For the Lord shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words." (I Thess. 4:13-18).

In the gospel of John, Jesus is quoted as saying, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die." (John 11:25-26). In chapter 14:1-3, Jesus added, "Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." In Rev. 21:3-4, in the midst of the description of heaven, there are the words, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his peoples, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God: and he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning nor crying, nor pain, anymore: the first things are passed away."

No passage sets forth the Christian conception of death better than that found in Phil. 1:21-24, where Paul says, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, if this shall bring fruit from my work, then what shall I choose I know not. But I am in a strait betwixt the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ; for it is very far better: yet to abide in the flesh is more needful for your sake."

### Conversations

Over the years I have talked with a good many people who are nearing the end of life. Some time ago an elderly lady of this congregation, one who had passed her ninetieth birthday, whose husband had died some years earlier, who had no children, and who was in failing health, said to me, "Brother Baxter, is it wrong for me to want to go on?" I assured her that it was not wrong and that it was actually the feeling expressed by the apostle Paul in his Philippian letter. She said, "Well, some people tell me when I talk about wanting to die that it is a sin, and say, 'O Sister, don't talk like that.'" She was right, for she had fulfilled the purpose of her life and to go on and be with the Lord was far better than to linger longer here on the earth.

Some months ago I visited another member of this congregation, one who was in the hospital because of a terminal illness, she made the request that I and the church pray that she might die, if it could be the Lord's will. She said it something like this, "Brother Baxter, if you don't feel that it will upset people, or that it will be misunderstood, I wish you and the church would pray that my life might end, and that I might be spared additional suffering."

Only a few days ago I talked with a person who like the one just mentioned also has a terminal illness. As we talked she explained that she is eager to continue to do her work as long as possible because there are many things that she feels need to be done before her time is up. She even hopes that her situation in facing death may be one of some encouragement and help to others. The conversation was not morbid, nor depressing, but very realistic as one expressed the urgent desire to do certain other things before going on to meet the Lord.

I recall another conversation with a member of this congregation. As I entered the hospital room, this person, who could not live more than a few weeks, was talking happily on the telephone to a Christian friend. As I listened you would have thought that she was to be released from the hospital the next day and would soon go on a lovely vacation. She appeared to be radiantly happy. She told me how grateful she was that she had been allowed to live long enough to care for her mother, and that now since this responsibility was lifted from her she was ready to die. Again, it was not morbid, but a thoughtful facing of the realities of the situation by a devout Christian.

Some months ago when Brother A. R. Holton passed away, his wife accepted it with unusual Christian faith. I saw her a few days later and instead of being sad and morose, she told me how her husband had done certain things on his last day and then how that quietly he had passed away. She then said, "This was the day that he had lived for, for more than seventy years. This was the finest day of his life."

None of the things that we are saying should be taken to imply that death is easy. It is not easy because it involves separation. However, our Lord tells us that these separations are not permanent and that we shall meet our loved ones in a world beyond, where the tears and sorrows of this life are left behind. Death is not easy because it involves the loss of many blessings which we know here on earth, but again, we can accept this loss because we will be receiving far greater blessings in the more wonderful world to come. Yet again, death is not easy because it involves the end of our earthly work. It is always difficult to lay down one's tools and to know that one will not pick them up again, but we must remember that the Lord will raise up others to do the necessary things just as he raised us up to do what we have been doing.

Again, death is not easy because it involves our entrance into the unknown. Anything that we have not done before, or anywhere that we have not gone before is likely to bring with it some uncertainties and fears. Brother B. C. Goodpasture has put it in a wonderful way, however, in the words, "It is wonderful to contemplate what happens in the first five minutes after death."

As we face the unknown of the future we have the great undergirding promise of the Lord that he will be with us. In Matt. 28:20 we read, "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." This same comforting thought is found in David's great twenty-third psalm, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." (Ps. 23:4). It is also reflected in Paul's words to Timothy, "I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day." (II Tim. 1:12).

I think of it in terms of a child's fears of the unknown. There is certain fear and anxiety in going to school for the first time, but a child is able to make it because he is accompanied to the school by his parents. There must be some uncertainty connected with riding in a car for the first time, spending the first night away from home, being for the first time in a big downtown department store, and many other experiences. Yet, children accept these in their stride because they have the confidence that comes from being accompanied by those whom they love and trust. Similarly, as we cross over the river of death, we have the assurance that our Lord is with us.

#### Conclusion

In the book of Hebrews there is a great summary sentence of what we are trying to say, "He also himself in like manner partook of the same; that through death he might bring to naught him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." (Heb. 2:14-15). Christ came to deliver us from the fear of death. The Christian conception is that death is not a part of life. It is an intruder which was brought into the world by man's sin. In the fullness of time Christ triumphed over death and made possible man's conquering of the same.

Our responsibility is to so live that we are ready to meet our maker at the time of death. This means that we must become Christians, thus being cleansed of our sins. It means that we need to work diligently to use our time, our talents, and our resources for the Cause of Christ. Then, when death comes, it is not something that would cause us to cower in fear, but rather an opportunity of entering into a more wonderful world beyond.

A noted infidel was walking one day with Alexander Campbell. He observed, "Yonder ox has no fear of death." Campbell replied, after a moment's thought, "But neither does yonder ox have any hope in death. Christ has taken the fear out of death and has replaced it with hope and anticipation."