

Death Match

Living With an Eye on Dying

March 03, 2024

Today we're facing what it means to live in the light of the darkness of death!

So here's the *question*: **Are you living or dying?** And here's the *answer*: **Yes!** Like it or not, *life is a death march*. And **every day about 167,000 life-lights die out**. And we *need* to face *death* – in fact, *stare death in the face* – or we *can't* be freed from the *fear* by the *One* with power over *death*.



Years ago, Shar and I saw Jerry Seinfeld when he was retiring his classic bits. And one of his best is about a study “that said, public speaking is the average person’s *number one* fear. Number *two* is *death!* Which means, to the *average* person, if you *have* to be *at a funeral*, you’d rather be *in the casket* than *doing the eulogy.*” It’s funny cuz it’s *absurd ... and believable ...* because the reason *death* isn’t the *number one* fear is because we work so *hard* to keep from really *considering* it. Because, **death is by far the harshest reality of life.** I mean, it’s *only* a matter of *when*. And then, the only *reason* it comes as a *shock*, is that we spend so much *mental effort* avoiding *pondering* the *inevitable*. But **that’s where DeathClock.com comes in!** Answer a few *questions*, choose between *normal, pessimistic, sadistic, and optimistic*, and it’ll *estimate* your *death-day* and start *counting down the seconds!* Mine’s *optimistically* March 16, 2047. So, **when do you think you’re gonna die?** “That’s morbid.” You sure?

The *days* of our *lives* are *seventy years*; and if by reason of *strength* they are *eighty years*, yet their boast is only *labor* and *sorrow*; for it is soon *cut off*, and we *fly away*. ... So teach us to number our days, that we may *gain* a *heart of wisdom*. – Psalm 90:10-13 NKJ

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. – Philippians 1:21 NIV

Right? I was *recently* at the *bedside* of a *precious friend* and *longtime* His Placer the *day* before she *died*. And we *talked* about the *moment* when **Jesus will appear to each of us and care for us, and comfort us, the moment before we realize that our body fell off ... like toenail clippings.** And, *like* toenail clippings, we *won't* want it *back*, because ... *gross*. *Death* is something we really *need* to *prepare* for. But it’s something we don’t want to. Which is *why* we find ourselves *placed* in a world where **turmoil forces us to face what we need to prepare for.** Which means **we’ve gotta learn to trust Jesus in the midst of the turmoil on our trip to the grave!** Aaron spoke on *one* of my *favorite* stories last Sunday, when Jesus *calms* the *storm*. But *that’s* not why it’s one of my *favorites* – it’s *because* of the question *underneath* it all: **Why was Jesus sleeping while the storm was raging?** And to answer *that*, we need to ask *who’s* in charge of the *storms*.



For [the Lord] commands and *raises the stormy wind*, which lifts up the waves of the sea. ... Then they [finally] cry out to the Lord in their trouble, and He brings them out of their distresses ... He guides them to their desired haven. ... Whoever is wise will observe these things, and they will understand the [purposeful, painful] lovingkindness of the Lord. – Psalm 107:25-43 NKJ

The thing we don't like about Jesus, or at least don't like to think about Jesus, is how **He'll lead us into a storm, if it's for our eternal best** ... especially if it's the only way to get our full and faithful attention. Because, **meaningful change comes mostly through crisis**; because that's when the opportunity and the motivation most forcefully and effectively present themselves.

Without that storm the boys couldn't've comprehended the depth of His power and authority. And so, **Jesus makes some waves in order to ultimately calm our fears**. Which is why His love sometimes feels like the opposite of love. But behind the temporary turmoil, is a far greater eternal purpose. Because **we're not here to avoid pain or fear or suffering or death, but to face them with faith in Him**. Which is why He did what He did, the way He did, when He went to sleep during that storm. And it's one of my favorite Gospel stories to weave!

As they sailed, He fell asleep. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat so that it was nearly swamped and they were in great danger. But Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples went and woke Him, saying, "Lord, save us!" "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" [But, rather than bail 'em out, He chose this as a teaching moment, and] He replied, "You of little faith, [In what? His power and authority] why are you so afraid?" [Of what? Drowning! Dying! Because we fear death to the degree that we lack faith in the One with the power over death. And their fear has overwhelmed their faith. So] [They] said to Him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" [Cuz it appears You don't. But, of course, He did. So] Then [after rebuking them] He got up [from His cushion] and rebuked the winds and the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely [dead] calm. [Then] He [again] said to His [suddenly terrified] disciples, [Now] "Why are you so afraid? [Of what? Him!] Do you still have no faith?" [In What? His love! but] They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this?" – Mt 8:23-26; Mk 4:37-41; Lk 8:22-24 NIV



That's the question, isn't it! Because, as Aaron pointed out, it's one thing to see Him as Teacher; and it's another to see Him as Savior; but ultimately **we need to see Him and receive Him as God the Creator!** Otherwise, **we'll limit Him by our limited understanding of Him**. Because:

Faith comes from hearing the message, [Of the power and authority and love of Christ our Creator] and the message is heard through the Word of Christ. – Romans 10:17 NIV

So He sends us (of little faith) out to sea to face our fears, to drive us into His Word, **so we'll wake up and see His power and authority and love**. Sometimes, on Sundays, on my way to church, I see older folks out running – as though trying to outrun death without running to the One who gives life. So, **does a sleeping Jesus in the midst of our struggles, indicate a lack of concern?** Quite the opposite! It reveals His desire to guide and strengthen our faith so it can outpace our fears.

For *this* is God, our God forever and ever; [and in the storm, “He *guides* them to their *desired haven*.” So, *like it or not*] He will be *our Guide* even to *death*. – Psalm 48:14 NKJ

[For] His eyes see, [and yet] His *eyelids test*, the children of man. – Psalm 11:4 ESV



“I don’t want Him to test and I don’t wanna think about death.” Nobody does. But we must. It’s inevitable. And we’re all in this boat together. And He’s only able to remove our fears and to comfort us to the degree that we’re willing to strengthen our faith in His Word. Only then can we show Him that we know Him. Cuz the true test of faith is our trust; and the true test of trust is our calm. The night before His own turmoil and death on the cross, He warns His disciples, “in this world you will have trouble.” (Jn 16:33) Why? Cuz this isn’t home; it’s a home away from home where faith is grown in children created in the image of our Father-of-lights, as James (1:17) puts it.

Even though Jesus was the Son of God, [and mainly because He was the Son of God] He learned obedience [down here] by what He suffered. – Hebrews 5:8 NCV

Because growth and strength and wisdom come through hardship. It’s a simple fact of life that high winds cause deep roots. True in the storm. True in our lives. Which is why:

In this world you will have trouble. But [as Jesus goes on to say] take heart! [Now, which word should we emphasize?] I have overcome the world. – John 16:33 NIV

If we stress “overcome”, it’s as if He’s saying, “I’ve overcome the world, so you won’t have that much trouble.” But if we heed His warning, we’ll stress “I”, as in, “I’ve overcome, so you can too.”



A world without turmoil is like a health club without weights, or a boot-camp without an obstacle course. And that’s my kind of health club and boot-camp! And that’s the problem! And so, the weight of the world basically trains us by forcing us to face the harsh reality of mortality. And the reason we so despise anything that reminds us of our day of death, or the inevitability of losing those we love, is because we hate facing the fear of losing the unwinnable battle we’re fighting. But face it we must, for:

No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, [when it’s time to go, it goes!] and no one has power in the day of death. [When we’re done, we’re done!] There is no release from that war – Ecclesiastes 8:8 NKJ

Until, that is, Jesus came, and became like us, to fight for us, to win the unwinnable battle on our behalf! And in the process, He paid the price and paved the way for our safe passage. And, as believers, we need to learn to rest in that. I’m a good dad, in that it goes against my will to see my kids suffer pain. And yet, I paid a dentist to drill their teeth. Cuz, if we don’t allow such lesser afflictions, they’ll suffer much greater afflictions. Which is why, we lovingly schedule short-term pain in light of long-term wellbeing.



I'm *still* scarred from the *turmoil* of my son, at two, being taken to surgery, looking to *me*, scared to death, screaming, "Help me, daddy!" I was crushed by having to *restrain* an *intense instinct* to *shield* him, due to a *higher desire* to *save* him from a *far worse affliction*. And **saving-love must outweigh shielding-love or it isn't true love**. And God is love! And He sees death very differently than we. Cuz to Him, roughly **166,859 every day, 6,952 every hour, 116 every minute**, aren't exits! **Those kids are coming, not going**.

[Which is why the Psalmist writes] *Precious* in the sight of the Lord is the death of His *godly ones*. – Psalm 116:15 NAS

"You're home! Good job! Enter into My joy!" (Mt 25:21) And so, as Aaron *touched on* last Sunday, **He'll do whatever it takes to bring home the most**. Wouldn't you? The stories of *Scripture* make it more than *clear* that **chaos is never evidence of God's absence**. It's just the *race* we're called to *run*, as we *fight* the *good fight*. (2 Tim 4:7) Because, as Paul tells us, **His power is perfected in the midst of our weakest moments when we're forced to face our limitations and mortality**.

[In fact] During the days of *Jesus'* life on earth, [just like us] He offered up *prayers* and *petitions* with loud *cries* and *tears* to the One who could save *Him* from *death*, and He was heard because of His *reverent submission*. [To God's will] – Hebrews 5:7 NIV

But it didn't stop the *cross*! Why? Because **our eternal best outweighed His temporary torturous tumult**. And *because* of His *obedience*, He *knew* He was *heard*; and that's *all* He *needed* to be *reassured*, cuz He *absolutely trusted* in the *Father's love*. So **God's plan up there, coupled with Jesus' obedience down here, turned the worst tragedy into the greatest triumph, and the ultimate expression of God's love and power!** But who could've seen *that* coming?

What man can *live* and not see *death*? [I know this one! The Son of Man!] Can *he* deliver his life from the *power* of the *grave*? [Yes!] – Psalm 89:48 NKJ

[Because, He said] "I will ransom them from the *power* of the *grave*; I will redeem them from *death*. ... O Grave, I will be your destruction!" – Hosea 13:14 NKJ

But **nobody saw it coming, because it was an inside job!** And:

He shall redeem you from *death*, and in *war* from the *power* of the *sword*. – Job 5:20 NKJ

Since the children have *flesh* and *blood*, He too shared in their *humanity* so that by His *death* He might *destroy* [the devil] who holds the *power* of *death* – Hebrews 2:14 NIV

Because, **in our unwinnable death match with death, death is no match for Life!** Just as a tomb full of *darkness* is no *match* for ... *even a match*. And the *One* rightly called the *Light of Life*, said:

I give them *eternal life*, and they shall *never perish*; no one can snatch them out of My hand. [Cuz] My *Father*, who has given them to *Me*, is greater than *all* – John 10:28-29 NIV

So whatever you do, don't leave Him sleepin' while you go on tryin' to bail yourself out!