

Death and Resurrection #1: Funerals are Better than Birthdays

Death is something that all men face (but for two in all history, Enoch and Elijah), yet most people for most of their lives do not really think it will happen to them. It is seemingly so far out in the future that its inevitability is not usually present in our thinking. We went to a funeral this last Friday and it brought to mind how in Ecclesiastes it says that funerals are better than birthdays or weddings or comedy shows:

Eccl. 7:1-4 – “A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one’s birth. It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. ” (Sadness of the countenance doesn’t mean depression, but solemn and serious reflection.)

Why? Because birthdays and weddings are filled with rejoicing, hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future life in this world, whereas funerals tend to focus our attention on what happens after death, and on our own readiness for it.

Few people would agree that the day of death is better than the day of birth, except for people who are experiencing extreme and excruciating pain, the suicidal, and those Christians who are living in a real and abiding relationship with God through Christ. Even many Christians have a fear of death, but it should not be.

The Inevitability of Death

We shouldn’t have to belabor this point because it should be obvious from the experience of all men in all nations, through all history. The point is not that all men die, but how to get people to face up to it when they still have time to mend their ways by believing on Christ.

Eccl. 7:2 – “... for that is the end of all men ...”

Eccl. 8:8 – “There is no man that hath power over the spirit to retain the spirit; neither hath he power in the day of death; and there is no discharge in that war.”

The Consequence of Death – Judgment by God

What follows death is the consequence of sin – judgment by an all powerful, all holy God. Physical death is really the result of spiritual death.

Heb. 9:27 – “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment;”

Mt. 10:28 – “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

2 Cor. 5:10 – “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.”

Even Christians will stand before God’s judgment. Unbelievers’ everlasting souls will be judged based solely on their works, and therefore condemned to hell for their sins. The eternal state of believers will be determined, not by the sins of which we were guilty, but on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf. There is still a judgment based on works though, even for us. It is not the basis for a “heaven-or-hell” judgment, but a judgment for rewards (or the lack of).

1 Cor. 3:11-15 (our works will be tried by fire to see what remains)

Rev. 20:12-15 – “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it: and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell [*literally Hades, the current place for the unbelieving dead*] were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.”

Even though most Christians and even many preachers find the topic of judgment to be unpleasant and so avoid it, judgment is a critical part of the gospel.

Ac. 17:30-31 – “...now commands all men everywhere to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained: whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

The Immortality of the Soul

Men fear death because a guilty conscience makes them aware that there will be a judgment to come. Many can, through mental evasions and vain confidences, convince themselves that death is the end of all existence, and that there is no God to call their lives to account. In fact, it is a rejection of moral accountability that turns men into atheists – it is easier to deny the existence of God than to face the prospects of facing him as Judge. They want to live without external moral authority, without responsibility to anyone or anything outside themselves. In effect, they see themselves as gods.

Not only atheists, but some religions deny the immortality of the soul, or any final judgment. Jehovah's Witnesses believe the soul's destruction will be so complete as to no longer exist, and so they deny Hell. Many refer to death as merely "soul sleep", with no painful existence in Hell. Hindus believe in reincarnation and karma as an alternative to a single all powerful Judge and a single, final, unalterable judgment.

Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus shows clearly that the soul exists in a conscious form after death. Lk. 16:19-31.

The Fear of Death

Why do men fear death? Partly because of that judgment to come and their feelings of guilt, but even people who deny hell and God and a judgment to come usually fear death. **So a more general reason that men fear death is that they have lived unfulfilled lives.** (from Morrie Schwartz, in the book/movie, "Tuesdays with Morrie", by Mitch Albom)

- For men who live only for this world, death is the end of all their hopes, dreams, goals, aspirations, and appetites.
Prov. 10:28 – "The hope of the righteous shall be gladness: but the expectation of the wicked shall perish."
Prov. 11:7 – "When a wicked man dieth, his expectation shall perish: and the hope of unjust men perisheth."
- In a more general sense, they often see that their lives are unfulfilled because they accomplished very little or nothing of lasting importance. They came, they lived, they died, and nothing of any significance in the world really changed. Their lives were void, empty, meaningless.
- They also might see, at the end of their lives when it is too late to change, that they have missed out on the most important things of life – family, friends, and knowing God.
- They realize that they did not experience the real joy and purpose of life, just pursuits of various interests.

The Death of a Believer

The death of a believer is completely different, for several reasons:

- We do not fear Hell, because we know our sins have been forgiven through Christ.
Heb. 2:15 – Jesus delivers "them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."
- We know that this life is not all there is, and that there is a future life of blessing following physical death, and that that is where our real treasure lies. Not gold or silver or loved ones here on earth, but beyond.
1 P. 1:3-4 – "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you,"
- We know that we will be reunited with all the saints and our loved ones who have gone before us "in the Lord".
Mt. 8:11 – "And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven."
- Our greatest expectation, and the ground of our hope, is to see Christ in person, the one who died for us.
Phl. 1:21-23 – "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ... For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you."

Ps. 90:12 – "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."