

THE HOPE OF THE RIGHTEOUS

by Ron Harvey

WHEREFORE I PRAISED THE DEAD WHICH ARE ALREADY DEAD MORE THAN THE LIVING WHICH ARE YET ALIVE.

Ecclesiastes 4:2

INTRODUCTION

The days of our lives are like the sands in an hourglass. When we are born, the days of our lives begin to slip away immediately. But we are not too concerned. It seems like the sand is falling slowly. There is plenty left. It seems like our life will never end. And so it seems to the children in this congregation. They are not the least concerned. They have plenty of days left. Look at little Joy and Anna. Do you think they are the least concerned with what I'm saying right now?

But the days of our lives slip by fast and soon we find that there are more days that have passed than those that remain. And we begin to give the end of our life a little more attention. There are some in our congregation who are about halfway to their life expectancy. There is about half of the sand left in the hourglass. Those in this condition are a little more concerned. And it seems like the sand falls faster now, doesn't it? The days click off faster and faster.

And then, we begin to see the end approaching. The remaining days of our lives are few and they pass away so quickly. And suddenly, we realize that our life is no more than a vapor and then it is gone.

Actually, death is fast approaching for all of us. Every one of us must pass through that gate. We are marching toward it with every rhythmic step. And, we cannot slow the tempo of the march. Our life counts down with a steady beat. Like the steady beat of a persistent drummer in the distance. The days click off and the beat goes on. And we march toward that portal that opens to another world.

We might like to turn the parade around and march some other direction but it's a one way street that leads to the gate, and we begin to see how inevitably that gate grows nearer and nearer until it is in plain view.

But, don't worry, our text for this morning offers hope -- marvelous hope. Solomon says:

WHEREFORE I PRAISED THE DEAD WHICH ARE ALREADY DEAD MORE THAN THE LIVING WHICH ARE YET ALIVE.

I. Now, the first thing we see from this text is Solomon's lament for the living, because he says that those that have already died stand in a better condition than the living. This theme is not only found in our text for this morning, but in the book of Ecclesiastes in general. Ecclesiastes begins early on with the well known declaration, "*Vanity of vanities. All is vanity.*" (Ecclesiastes 1:2)

Along the way, this life is surely full of troubles. And perhaps our gravest enemy lies within us -- our old sin nature. We live in a body of flesh that Paul calls the body of sin and death. And we groan under the burden of it. We cannot escape it. It is a part of us all along the way. It causes us great turmoil. We are counted as sinners from conception and we prove it over and over and over again.

The Bible talks about the sins of our youth and indeed, in our youth, we fill the bucket with our sins. They are counted by the thousands and the hundreds of thousands -- little sins and gross sins, little white lies and big black lies.

Little children don't have to learn to lie. They master the art of sin at an early age. Or should I say, their sin nature masters them! By the time they are teenagers they are masterful sinners. And, you can correct them and reform their behavior somewhat by discipline, but you can't free them from the sin nature. They are slaves to it.

Now we would like to believe that we set aside the sins of our youth as we grow older. We would like to think that we grow wiser, less apt to sin against God. But in every case, the sin nature continues to plague us. It plagues us in middle age and it plagues us in our old age too. It is a plague and a curse upon us and it torments us even unto our death bed.

Perhaps Solomon was thinking of this curse when he said it is better for those who have died than those that are alive.

Nothing is worse than a disease that will never, ever go away. There are many such diseases where there is no known cure.

Michael J. Fox has Parkinson's disease.
Mohammed Ali has Parkinson's disease.
My sister has Muscular Sclerosis.
My wife has Type I diabetes.

As horrifying as all these diseases are, all of us are inflicted with something far worse than these diseases. It is called a sin nature.

It is a **permanent** condition.

It is always **present** with us in this life.
It is always **powerful** in us in this life.
Its' fruit is always **painful** in this life.

It is a **terminal** condition. Some of these other diseases are manageable. But, the sin nature brings forth sin and when sin has conceived it brings forth death.

Not only do we have this internal adversary, but we have an external one as well.

There is that old Evil One who roams about seeking to devour us. Satan uses our sinful nature against us and harasses us throughout our life. He chases us like a greyhound chases a rabbit and he is relentless in his pursuit of us. He never gives us a moment's rest. We tire along the way but he never wearies of the chase.

And so, we find that falling into sin is our frequent experience in this life. And, we pay such a price for sin, don't we? That great bible principle, "Be not deceived, God is not mocked, whatsoever ye shall sow, that shall you also reap," is never more true than when we engage in sin. Sin will run its course and we will reap the ruin of it.

And in many ways, that is the recurring story of our life. We follow our sin nature. We sin. We pay the price even in this life.

Example: There was a man who bragged loud and often about his heavy drinking. He was quite proud of it and not in the least ashamed of it. He often boasted about his drunken escapades. He would tell funny stories about them. And everyone would laugh and he would be the center of attention. Then one night, in the middle of the night, he got a call from the sheriff's office. His only son had been in a fatal car accident. His 21 year old son had been drinking at a friend's house, just like his dad was wont to do. And, he got intoxicated just like his dad. And he tried to drive home just like his dad had done many times. And, he crossed the middle line of the highway and hit a truck head on. And he was dead. At his son's funeral, this man wept long and wept bitterly.

But, *"Be not deceived, God is not mocked, whatsoever ye shall sow, that shall you also reap."*

And so, in this life, there is the inevitable grief that we suffer over sin. It is our constant companion. And, it wears us down day by day. We long for an end to the sorrow that besets us over our sin. But there seems never to be any relief. And so we cry as Paul did, *"Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"*

Not only are we troubled by our sin nature, but also we are beset by many other afflictions in this life -- physical afflictions, financial difficulties, circumstances beyond our control. We are disappointed on many fronts in this life and we suffer unspeakable hurts at times. And there seems to be no end to our pain and our suffering in this life. And many of you here this morning may be suffering. Some of you are sick. Some of you are burdened with caring for family members. Others of you are broken hearted over some loss.

So, the first point of our text is that there is much misery and trouble in this life. And for that reason, Solomon says *“I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.”* That is, it is better to have already died than to be still alive.

But I want you to notice secondly that:

II. This statement of Solomon applies only to the righteous and not to the wicked.

For the righteous have a glorious and joyful hope in death, but the wicked have no such comfort at all.

Our message this morning concerns the hope of the righteous. But note:

A. If you are an enemy of Christ, it is not better for you to die. It is far worse.

1. Judas thought it better to hang himself than to live. Judas, being a greedy man, betrayed his friend Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Judas stood there in the Garden of Gethsemane and watched as the angry mob roughly took Jesus down the road and into the city. Distraught over his evil deed, he went and threw down the money in the temple but he could not undo his guilt and shame. So, thinking death to be the better option, he fastened the noose around his neck and stood on the precipice of eternity. He cast himself off the cliff and into the clutches of an angry God and a fiery punishment that was far worse than any torment in this life. Jesus said of Judas, *“It was better that he had not been born.”* (Mt. 26:24) You see, for the unrighteous, there is no comfort in death.

2. The rich man who barely took note of poor Lazarus sitting at his gate and eating the crumbs from his table, died and found that it was not better in death than in life. It was far worse. Actually, he had it quite nice in life and lived in relative comfort, but in death, he begged for one drop of water to be dipped on his parched tongue.

3. There have been many who have entered the realm of the dead, even killed themselves, thinking that death was better than the sufferings of this life, but it is not better on the other side for the unrighteous.

For the unrighteous, death is a cup of terror from which he does not want to drink.

So, how do the unrighteous prepare for death.

When it comes to death, some of the unrighteous comfort themselves by simply refusing to consider it.

Example: You know what an ostrich does when faced with danger, don't you? He sticks his head in the sand, thinking that if he can't see the danger, the danger can't see him. Like the ostrich, the unrighteous man often hides death from his thoughts and does not consider his final end because he fears what he might see. It is a foolish man who does not make preparation for his final destination.

Example: What if a man traveled a thousand miles to get to a certain town, but forgot to bring a boat to cross the last river before his destination.

Example: In high school I was about 100 pounds, so instead of playing football or baseball, I played chess. I remember one of my tournament games very vividly. I was playing one of the strongest high school players in the state and I set a trap and he walked right into it. It was about a twelve move combination and the whole combination was so pretty. I saw every move in advance and once he bit, his moves were forced. It all worked out perfectly until the very last move of the combination when I realized, to my horror, that he had one escape square for his king which I had not visualized. I lost that game because I did not make preparation for the very end. I was so sick after that game because my brilliant plan was just a losing combination because of one square at the end.

In the same way, how foolish it is for men to make all the brilliant preparations for life and yet fail to consider the end of it all. And so, having such a brilliant plan, all is lost in the end. And there will be much sorrow and regret. The Bible says there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, some fail to prepare for death by hiding their eyes hoping death will somehow go away.

Others smother out the thought of death with all the comforts and pleasures of this life.

Example: They are like the man who went to a fancy restaurant and ordered the finest steak and the most expensive wine and all the trimmings and feasted with his family for hours. But when the bill came, he had no money. You see, he was content to enjoy the feast for a season, without considering the reckoning he would face in the end.

How foolish is the man who would enjoy all the pleasures of life and all the pleasures of sin for a season, as though there would be no payment to be made in the end.

But every unrighteous man must come to death and when he does, he comes with a great sense of loss. The unrighteous man knows that all his labors and all his riches are about to be counted for nothing. The things that he labored for all his life are now worth nothing to him. All of his ill gotten gain is now worthless. And the sense of loss must be enormous. The pleasures of sin enjoyed for a moment are all swallowed up in the terror of death. The feasting gives way to want. The carefree frolicking of his life gives way to fear and torment.

Example: I often wonder if a man like Donald Trump is deceived by his riches.

At the end, there is a reckoning for all the unrighteous. Their houses and lands and all their money will be of no value and they will be called on to make the ultimate payment for their sins. And, the payment will be too great a price. They will be called on to pay the unpayable and to bear the unbearable -- and this for all eternity. Theirs will be a sorrow and a regret that reaches to the depth of the soul and this sorrow will never end. And so, the unrighteous would give anything in the world to go back to the land of the living no matter how difficult their life may have seemed. For the other side of death is an endless terror to the unrighteous.

So you see, when Solomon says that he prefers the condition of those that have already died to that of the living, it is clear that he is not saying it is better for the unrighteous dead. It is not better, but far worse for the unrighteous in death.

B. But if you are the friend of Christ, with your sins washed in his blood and his righteousness imputed to your account, then you come to the death bed not shaking in terror but with a quiet confidence knowing there is a better place for you. Death holds no sting for you, but it is a gate opening to a better condition, a condition which Solomon says is more to be praised than living in this world.

The righteous man comes to death differently than the unrighteous. Whereas the unrighteous often comes noisily with a conscience that condemns him,

1. The righteous man comes to death with a quiet conscience.

It has been said that when a man brushes close with death, his life flashes before his eyes. It seems that in the desperation of the moment his mind is quickened and he is able to see the years of his life flashing like lightening across his mind.

The unrighteous man must see his great wickedness, all the sins of his life, all the lies and the murders and the adulteries and the thefts, all the hurt he has inflicted on others, the devastation he has left on his children, all the wasted years. As an unrighteous man lies on his death bed, all of this comes to his mind and he lies in noisy terror, at war with his conscience, which condemns him moment to moment.

Not so the righteous man. He lies on his death bed with a quiet conscience. Not by his own works. For he knows that he is not justified by his works. But he lies with a quiet conscience by the righteousness of Christ, which is laid to his account. His mind is at rest knowing that his sins are cast far away, that sins are not imputed to his account, and the perfect righteousness of Christ is his by substitution.

The righteous man on his death bed sings that old hymn *Rock of Ages* and finds peace when he comes to the refrain which says,

*“Nothing in my hand I bring,
Only to thy cross I cling.”*

So, the righteous man rests easy upon his bed of affliction.

Not only does the righteous man come to death with a quiet conscience, but also,

2. The righteous man comes to death with a sense of gain and not a sense of loss.

His sense is not that he is about to lose it all, but that he is about to become a joint heir with the Lord Jesus Christ. He does not feel the sorrow and remorse in the same way as the unrighteous man. His loss will be a good loss. He will lose his body of sin and death. He will lose the affliction and persecution and sickness that so plagued him in this life. He will lose all the limitations of this mortal body. And with great joy he will say with Paul, “To die is gain.”

And so, you see that when Solomon said,

*WHEREFORE I PRAISED THE DEAD WHICH ARE ALREADY DEAD
MORE THAN THE LIVING WHICH ARE YET ALIVE,*

He spoke only of the righteous man and not the unrighteous.

- II. When Solomon spoke these words, he spoke of a better condition for the righteous after death. And so, we consider lastly the question, “What is that better condition?”

Now much could be said about that better condition, but time would fail us this morning. Time would fail if I were to tell you about the new heavens and the new earth which will be prepared for you. And time will not allow me to tell of the mansion that Jesus has gone to prepare for you, or the streets of gold, or the crown of glory to be placed on your head and which you will gladly cast at the feet of Christ. And I can’t possibly talk this morning of the wonder of it all, when we will be surrounded by all the mighty angels and the saints from throughout all of history as we worship the Lamb on his awesome throne. We can’t talk this morning about the resurrection of our bodies from the graves and the reuniting of our souls and our bodies. And there is no time to talk about the great victory that will be won at Armageddon over the forces of evil and how we will serve in the Captain’s army and how we will watch as Jesus dashes his enemies to pieces. All of this is for another time.

But there is one most important condition of our afterlife with which I would conclude this morning. And, if this were the only benefit, it would justify the words of Solomon who said,

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Here is the great truth that will forever make the condition of the next life infinitely more praiseworthy than this present life:

The soul of the believer, when separated from the body, goes into the very presence of Christ.

Now, the Apostle Paul said something interesting in II Cor. 5:6. He said, "*While we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord.*"

I know that Jesus is present with us by his spirit. And he is an ever present help. But we walk by faith here in this world. And Jesus is in a far country such that Paul could say, "While we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord."

Example: There was a young man who fell in love and got engaged just before going off to war. And when he left, his fiance promised that she would be true and would wait for him. He promised that he would return to marry her. From the moment his train pulled from the station, they were both heartsick. Although they wrote letters and talked on the telephone when they could, nothing could cure their lovesickness. He longed for her, and she longed for him and each day they were apart seemed like a week and each week seemed like a month. But when the war was finally over, the young man came home and what a happy reunion they had. They each threw out their arms and embraced each other as though to say, "I will never let you go again."

And this is the feeling that Paul had. Jesus had departed to heaven. And, he felt that as long as he was still living in this body, he was absent from Christ.

Paul said he would "*rather be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord.*" II Cor. 5:8

And to the Phillipians he wrote that he had, "*a desire to depart and to be with Christ.*" Phil. 1:23

You see, death for the righteous man is merely passing through the gate to embrace a lover after a long absence. And the moment you pass through that gate, lift up your eyes, for there he will be!

Now, some wrongfully assert that the soul sleeps in death until the body is finally raised in the end.

But this is not what Jesus told the penitent thief on the cross when he said, “*Today, thou shalt be with me in paradise?*” Luke 23:43

I tell you, there will be no greater moment in all of your life than the moment that you pass through the gate of death and appear in the presence of Jesus. And, it appears that the angels will carry you immediately from your death bed into his presence.

Example: You remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus and how when Lazarus died the angels carried him immediately to Abraham’s bosom which is a reference to the very heaven where Christ and the souls of righteous men reside. When Lazarus closed his eyes in death, the angels were there waiting and the Bible says the angels carried Lazarus to heaven and Lazarus opened his eyes and found himself surrounded by the comforts of Christ’s heaven.

Example: A friend of mine once told me the story of the day his 5 year old son died after a long battle with leukemia. It was a sad story and I can’t tell of the many tears shed along the way. But, his son was finally near death and the family was gathered in the hospital room waiting for the moment. The child was too weak to respond and was basically unconscious as he had been for days. Suddenly, the child sat straight up in bed, wide eyed. My friend told me that he looked past those in the room as though he saw something very remarkable. Then, he lay backwards and his soul was absent from his little body.

Could I suggest to you that the angels came to get him just like they came to get Lazarus. This little child saw the angels come for him and it invigorated him one last time so that he mustered the strength to sit up and he opened his eyes wide in amazement. Then, he closed his eyes in death. But in the same instant the angels carried him to the arms of the Savior and he opened his eyes in heaven and he saw Jesus because, as Paul said, “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.”

This is our great hope, to close our eyes one final time and to open them again and find ourselves face to face with the One who died for us.

Right now we live by faith, and we believe that Jesus loves us. But we can hardly believe it because we know we are such unworthy creatures and so unlovable in ourselves.

It is one thing when someone tells you he loves you. But it is more assuring when he puts his arms around you and holds you.

Now, in faith, we sing the song “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” but then, on that great day, we will sing, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for his arms around me tell me so.”

I look forward to that awesome moment, that very moment when I pass through death’s gate, when I will know by the everlasting arms around me that I am loved by Him. What a

moment in eternity that will be for you and that very moment is when you pass through the portal and find yourself in the arms of the one who has loved you from all eternity.

This is why Solomon said,

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