

- One reason we long to “go home” is because **death not only ends life, it invades life**

Look back at Ecclesiastes 12...

“Everyone becomes littler with death—when the human spirit departs, it takes with it the vital stuffing of life. Then, only the inanimate corpus remains, which is the least of all the things that make us human.” (Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*)

“Walter Alvarez, the great Chicago clinician of a generation ago, once quoted ‘a wise old lady’ who said to him, ‘Death keeps taking little bits of me.’ As his clinical description so clearly states: ‘She saw that with each attack of dizziness or fainting or confusion she became a little older, a little weaker, and a little more tired; her step became more hesitant, her memory less trustworthy, her handwriting less legible, and her interest in life less keen. She knew that for 10 years or more, she had been moving step by step towards the grave.’” (Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*)

- We must come to a point of acceptance, but *denial* remains strong to the end

“There is plenty of evidence that life does have its natural, inherent limits. When those limits are reached, the taper of life, even in the absence of any specific disease or accident, simply sputters out. Fortunately, most bedside doctors who restrict their practice to the care of the aged have come to understand this.” (Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*)

- And what about a death with *dignity*? Consider these thoughts...

“The great majority of people do not leave life in a way they would choose.” (Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*)

“There is often a serenity—sometimes even a dignity—in the act of death, but rarely in the process of dying.” (Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*)

“The greatest dignity to be found in death is the dignity of the life that preceded it. This is a form of hope we can all achieve, and it is the most abiding of all. Hope, resides in the meaning of what our lives have been.” (Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*)

- So, here are two things we *can* choose, two things we *can* control...

“A promise we can keep and a hope we can give is the certainty that no man or woman will be left to die alone.... For it is the promise of spiritual companionship near the end that gives us hope, much more than does the mere offsetting of the fear of being physically without anyone.” (Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*)

“The classic image of dying with dignity must be modified or even discarded, what is to be salvaged of our hope for the final memories we leave to those who love us? The dignity that we seek in dying must be found in the dignity with which we have lived our lives. *Ars Moriendi* is *ars vivedi*: The art of dying is the art of living. The honesty and grace of the years of life that are ending is the real measure of how we die. It is not in the last weeks or days that we compose the message that will be remembered, but in all the decades that preceded them. Who has lived in dignity, dies in dignity.” (Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*)

- A final thought for Christians on approaching death: an incredible change of perspective

1 Corinthians 13:12—For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (NIV)

1 Corinthians 13:12—Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. (NLT)

1 Corinthians 13:12—We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us! (MSG)

“At the moment of death, all things appear in a new perspective. The one who is called exchanges comparative darkness and limited knowledge for new light and knowledge commensurate with his new estate.... The things that the person thought important—his business affairs, the seasons crops, tomorrow's tasks, his success in pleasing those around him—all of these no longer matter at all. All of earth's cares and problems suddenly are left behind. And in their place the things to which he perhaps had given but little attention stand out as all-important—his attitude toward Christ, his Christian witness to those about him, his prayer life, the motives which underlay his public and private actions.” (42)

APPLICATION: priorities, money, possessions, relationships, truths, time, opportunities...

10. Christians Not to Sorrow as Those Who Have No Hope

— *1Thessalonians 4:13-18—Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.*

- Key takeaways from verses 13 and 18, which bookend the passage:
 - This comfort is written for **Christians** only, believers: *“Brothers and sisters”*
 - The key to comfort is **knowledge**, knowing things about life after death: *“we do not want you to be uninformed”*
 - The **consequence** of being uninformed is that *“you grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope”*
 - Grief is a natural response to death, so Christians are not forbidden to grieve, but to **grieve differently**, hopefully because of what they know: *“do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope”*
 - Unbelieving friends are often most open to the gospel—the hope we have—when they face death: *“the rest of mankind...have no hope”*
 - Christians can find comfort, hope, and encouragement discussing death and Christian teaching surrounding it: *“encourage one another with these words.”*

- How other Christian authors have applied and expressed this knowledge

1. If Death My Friend and Me Divide

Charles Wesley, 1762

If death my friend and me divide,
Thou dost not, Lord, my sorrow chide,
Or frown my tears to see;
Restrained from passionate excess,
Thou bidst me mourn in calm distress
For them that rest in thee.

Pass a few fleeting moments more
And death the blessing shall restore
Which death has snatched away;
For me thou wilt the summons send,
And give me back my parted friend
In that eternal day.

I feel a strong immortal hope,
Which bears my mournful spirit up
Beneath its mountain load;
Redeemed from death, and grief, and pain
I soon shall find my friend again
Within the arms of God.

2. Our old age is the scorching of the bush
By life's indwelling, incorruptible blaze.
O life, burn at this feeble shell of me,
Till I the sore singed garment off shall push,
Flap out my Psyche wings, and to thee rush. (George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul*)
3. "It is but natural that at such a time we should be acutely conscious of an aching void. We know that we shall no longer experience the kind words of love and helpfulness from the departed one. The widow is left to mourn the loss of her husband as she tends her fatherless children; the parents miss the cheerfulness of youth when a son or daughter is taken. We sorrow over the loss of our friends. We would be less than human if we did not feel that loss. But we rejoice that they have gone to the heavenly home. The loss is ours, not theirs." (43)
4. "I wrote the following more than twelve years ago, to honor our son and brother Eric, who died in a mountain-climbing accident in Austria in his twenty-fifth year, and to voice my grief. Though it is intensely personal, I decided to publish it in the hope that some of those who sit beside us on the mourning bench for children would find my words giving voice to their own honoring and grieving.
- What I have learned, to my surprise, is that in its particularity there is universality. Many who have lost children have written me. But many who have lost other relatives have done so as well, along with many who have experienced loss in forms other than the death of relatives or friends. The sharply particular words of Lament, so I have learned, give voice to the pain of many forms of loss.
- Rather often I am asked whether the grief remains as intense as when I wrote. The answer is, No. The wound is no longer raw. But it has not disappeared. That is as it should be. If he was worth loving, he is worth grieving over. Grief is existential testimony to the worth of the one loved. That worth abides. So I own my grief. I do not try to put it behind me, to get over it, to forget it.... Lament is part of life." (Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*)

5. “We moderns are absolutely shocked by the counsel that as we start to pray we should assume that we will die by the end of the prayer. The notion of reflecting on our own demise is actually an ancient spiritual discipline. Its intention is to remind us in the most vivid way possible that God is the One in charge of our days. Our hopes and dreams are in his hands and not ours. As a result, we can at last lay down the crushing burden of trying to be CEO of the universe...a well-reasoned reflection upon our demise will wonderfully clear the mind and purify the feelings. (Richard Foster, *Spiritual Classics*)
 6. “The best thing to do at times like this is not offer assurance, but just listen. ‘I’m sure you’ll be just fine’ is intended to cheer up the person in pain, but it also gives the unintended message ‘You’re not allowed to talk about death.’ Dying is hard enough, but dying and not being able to talk about it—if you want to and need to talk—is harder still. (Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*)
 7. “Nowhere more than at a Christian funeral should the world see the blessings of faith. At that particular time when hearts are more receptive than usual a special opportunity is presented to witness to the saving power of Christ and to point others to Him. The Christian doctrines concerning the immortality of the soul, God’s redemptive love for His people, and the certainty of future rewards and punishments probably can be more effectively presented at that time than at any other.” (44)
- Final quotations for reflection

On the death of believers:

“Those who have passed on undoubtedly would not want to come back to this world, with all of its sin and suffering, its injustice and limitations, even if that were possible. To return to this world after experiencing even briefly the heavenly life would be as inappropriate as for a college graduate to go back and enroll again in the first grade, or for one who has become President of the United States to resign that high office and hire himself out as a factory worker or farm hand for such work as he may have done in his early years. If our vision could penetrate the veil that separates this world from the next, so that we could really comprehend the beauty and glory of that realm, we may be sure that we would be far less given to tears, that we would indeed rejoice greatly when our loved ones are called home.” (46-47)

On the importance of belief:

“Blaise Pascal, a celebrated French mathematician and writer, in a wonderful letter to a bereaved friend, instead of repeating the ordinary platitudes of consolation, comforted him with this doctrine, saying: ‘If we regard this event, not as the effect of chance, not as a fatal necessity of nature, but as a result inevitable, just, holy, of a decree of His providence, conceived from all eternity, to be executed in such a year, day, hour, and in such a place and manner, we shall adore in humble silence the impenetrable loftiness of His secrets; we shall venerate the sanctity of His decrees; we shall bless the act of His providence; and uniting our will with that of God Himself, we shall wish with Him, in Him and for Him, the thing that He has willed in us and for us from all eternity.’” (48)

On believers approaching death

“Gerontologists have found that the older people become, the less fearful they are of dying.”
(Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*)

11. Prayers for the Dead

You may be unfamiliar with praying for the dead unless you were raised in the Roman Catholic church, have Roman Catholic friends, or a degree of familiarity with church history or Roman Catholic doctrine. Loraine Boettner summarizes the issue for us concisely:

“We believe that it avails nothing to pray for the dead. That practice is followed in the Roman Catholic Church, where it is closely connected with, and is a logical consequence of, their doctrine of purgatory. The high Anglican Church, which holds a position about half way between the Roman Catholic and the representative Protestant churches, also follows that custom. But practically all other Protestant churches reject it.

Prayers for the dead imply that their state has not yet been fixed, and that it can be improved at our request. We hold, however, that there is no change of character or of destiny after death, that what the person is at death he remains throughout all eternity. We find an abundance of Scripture teaching to the effect that this world only is the place of opportunity for salvation, and that when this probation or testing period is past only the assignment of rewards and punishments remain. Consequently, we hold that all prayers, baptisms, masses, or other rituals of whatever kind for the dead are unscriptural.” (49)

- A final example of how Roman Catholic beliefs have influenced Protestants
 - Prayers for the dead...
 - Suicide: “Do those who commit suicide go to heaven?”

12. Burial or Cremation

“What is the right method for disposal of the body? In the final analysis it is no doubt correct to say that the manner of disposal is not a matter of vital importance. We do not believe, for instance, that in the resurrection there will be any difference between those who are buried in the graves of the earth and those whose bodies were destroyed by fire, or devoured by wild beasts, or drowned in the sea, or blown to bits by the explosion of bombs. Certainly the martyrs who were burned for the faith and whose ashes were scattered by the winds shall arise in the resurrection, and their bodies shall be not one whit less glorious than those of others who received burial. There is no limit to the power of God. He who in the first place made the body from the elements of the earth can bring again the body that has been disintegrated by whatever means. The identical particles are not essential to a resurrection. A sailor buried at sea rises as surely as if he had been expensively embalmed and buried in the family plot.” (50)