

Death

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] So, this is the last of our miserable as sin series, okay? And naturally, it moves from where we've gone from this piece, which was really the theme of all, to division and disintegration and now death.

And you know, we know, we know, don't we, death's all around us, you know? And I think sometimes we become enured to death. It's a great word, you know? Enured means, well, I do, obviously.

Because I looked up, I knew this, I knew the word, but I didn't know. But it just really means accustomed to. We've just become accustomed. We've become desensitized in many ways. I struggled with this because we haven't, we haven't. In some ways, it's lost its shock value. You know, we know about famine and war and epidemic disease, but it all seems very far away unless the media choose to focus on it for whatever particular reason.

Much of it we never hear about. Sometimes it's just explained away now, scientifically, as just a natural part of life. Death is a natural part of life. In some places, it's even now embraced.

[1 : 13] But in films and in thrillers and in video games and in books, the themes are usually love or death, or both.

We see a lot of death. We've watched a lot of death. So at that level, we've come in and endured to it, I think, it's harmless until it gets close.

Then we're much more aware of it, generally, when it gets close to us. But even then, I think society, the society we live in, certainly, seems to have done its best to mask death with scented celebrations and bright colors.

This to life and the shining hope of another star twinkling down from the heavens. And that seems to be the way that we cope as a society with death.

We clothe it in nice words and nice thoughts and focus on the life. And of course, there's great value in that as well. But less we are seen to be making judgments on everyone else.

[2 : 23] I think as Christians, it's very easy for us to become blasé about death as well. We know a great deal about death. Christians probably speak more about death than anyone.

We celebrate the Lord's death in this great sacrament that we enjoyed this morning. But I do think that sometimes we treat it death like some kind of minor distraction on our way to heaven.

We downplay its horrors, you know, from the safety of our redemptive status. That we shrug our shoulders at death and we're peeking out from behind God's back and we're saying, well, it doesn't really, it's not that bad.

Jesus crushed its power. We've the victory so we can laugh in the face of suffering and in the face of death. Now, I don't like when Christians speak like that because I don't think it's biblical and it's shallow.

I think it lacks wisdom and sensitivity, and most of all, it's not like Christ because we don't find Christ speaking like that about death. Now, we know we're not to be afraid in the face of death because of what Jesus has done for us, but neither are we to be blasé about the reality of death.

[3 : 37] Death is ugly. Death is an end game for us. Death is something that shouldn't be in God's great world. It's the ultimate outworking of sin's dis-peace, of the division that sin brings, and of the disintegration.

Atrophy ends in death, and death is the dark, foreboding, cold enemy of every living being.

So it is something that's ugly. Now, just by way of introduction, I want to go back to Genesis chapter 2 and verse 17, because we go back to the beginning of the Bible just to find everything in its right context.

And Genesis chapter 2, Jesus says to Adam and Eve in verse 17, You may eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat. If you eat of it, you shall surely die. So that's the introduction of death in the Bible. Right from the very beginning, we recognize that death for the belief, death for us with the truth of God is a spiritual problem, or it's a spiritual reality.

[4 : 52] It's a basic spiritual truth. It's central to our understanding of the universe in which we live and of our condition.

So death comes into humanity's experience both as a consequence and as a judgment for rejecting God as Lord and King.

The day you eat of it, you shall surely die. And as they did, then we recognize the consequence and the judgment, denying the oversight of the author and source of life, God.

You shall surely die. Okay, so I'm going to ask a question. Was the fulfillment of what God said there, was it immediate?

You shall surely die. Was it immediate? Okay, I'm going to give four answers. Yes, not quite, no, absolutely. Okay?

[5 : 49] Do we recognize and see that the answer to this judgment of God was layered in many ways.

Yes, immediately there was a death in that the perfect relationship with God, our Father, and that relationship of trust had gone.

Trust with the author of life was gone. Not quite in the sense that God still loved them and still cared for them and still offered a rescue to them if they came to Him in repentance and forgiveness.

No, because they didn't die physically immediately. Did they? No, they went on to live. You shall surely die. Well, they didn't die physically immediately, but they began to die from that moment.

And unless they were rescued, absolutely, they would be both physical and spiritual death. Sin, in other words, breaks the relationship, and we are people who are dying physically and dead spiritually without Him.

[7 : 00] So Biblically, what does it mean death? Ultimately, it means separation, doesn't it? It's the ultimate division, the separation from life and the source of life, from shalom, from wholeness, from identity, from meaning, from love.

And its shadows are isolation and division and disintegration and aging and illness and hatred and evil and loneliness and lovelessness.

So we recognize now, I think here I'm making up a theological sort of statement because the Bible speaks about second death.

I'm not sure when the Bible speaks about first death, but I'm saying that the first death is the natural condition we're all born in, that we are spiritually separated from God from the moment we're born. Our natures are separated from God. That's the first death. But then there's physical death, which maybe some theologians would count as the first death.

[8 : 05] Is that violent or natural end of life? The ultimate, the ultimate individual experience. The greatest isolating reality that there is in every way, yet the most unnatural experience in the universe, the tearing apart of body and soul, the dissolution of life from belonging, from community, from family, from hope.

So that's physical death. And then there's the second death, which the Bible in Revelation speaks of, which points towards God's final judgment and the brutal experience of being separated from hope and from rescue and from opportunity to be in relationship with God and alive again.

And the end of the possibility of redemption and worship, a place utter disaster, a place, how would you, how would you today in our society, how would you describe hell to a society that can't be shocked anymore by anything and don't believe in anything like, it's very difficult, isn't it?

I think sometimes that's how Tim Keller got into some trouble in the way he tried to describe hell in a way that people would understand and others took it to an unnatural end as far as his description were concerned.

But is it not whatever else is the place without any expression of divine or human love? And unthinkable, where there are no conditions to allow the flourishing of beauty, only ugliness.

[10 : 01] That terrifies me, and that should terrify you. That spiritual death that Revelation speaks of, horrifying, dreadful.

So we've got that picture from Genesis. Then we come to this chapter, and Jesus speaks into the reality of death very strongly here in these very famous words when he speaks to Martha, and he says, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection, but Jesus said, I'm the resurrection in the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die yet, he shall live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Now, can I just go back a little bit to verse 21, where Martha says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

And that's important because there's mystery, isn't there, in Jesus' apparent absence at Lazarus' illness. Why didn't he come? Or why didn't he just pronounce a word from where he was and Lazarus wouldn't have died as he did on other occasions?

Martha, if you had been here, he wouldn't have died. Why didn't Jesus stop it? Why didn't he wait? Why did he stay where he was until after Lazarus had been in the grave for four days for goodness' sake?

[11:22] Great questions. Martha, questions that. And it's great because it speaks into our own, often, questions in the midst of God's sovereign decisions, why he chooses to do certain things and why he doesn't respond to our prayers and to our requests when we feel he ought to, is that mystery of his sovereignty, resting in trust and in faith, knowing that he has his reasons, even though we might not understand him.

How often have you asked that question? Lord, why weren't you there? Why didn't you do things differently? Why didn't you dance to my particular tune?

Because we think that he should have, with all. I'm not saying that in an arrogant, that we say it in an arrogant or a faithless way, but this is a great reality for us as we go through this story because he gives us astounding.

When he does arrive after Lazarus is dead, he gives us astounding statement in the hallway of death. He challenges its power. He nails it as a spiritual and a relational issue.

And he says that he's the only answer to it. That's what he's saying. What a claim he makes. I, it's not that I know the resurrection, I can think of how the resurrection works.

[12:46] He says, I am the resurrection and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except by me. He's claiming to be the, Siobhan spoke about promises.

He's claiming to be the promise that God made in the garden in Genesis 3.15, one of the most famous verses in the Bible where God makes the promise that the seed of the woman will crush Satan's head and he will bruise his heel.

And this is Jesus claiming to be the answer to that, the answer to the death that was brought into the world through Adam's sin. It's not bravado, it's remarkable self attestation.

There's no value in recording this story if it didn't happen. There's no benefit. Jesus is making this remarkable claim. He's saying, ultimately he's saying the offense has been made against me and I am the only one that can put it right.

I am the source of life. I am the hope of resurrected life and the paradoxes that it will come through my death.

[14:04] So it's a astounding statement. And the thing about Lazarus is that Lazarus is a sign of that. You know, we think about the miracles and we think, oh, they're great.

Jesus reveals his power and he reveals what he can do. But there's more to it. He's teaching as Thomas is speaking about this morning, about the importance of learning. The timing is intentional, isn't it?

Hugely intentional because he's heading for Jerusalem. He's heading for that place where his disciples say, oh, if you're going to go there, you already know they're out to kill you.

So you're going to be heading to your death. And he, of course, knew that. And his purpose was to go there. And the miracle speaks forward to the glory of God. He says that himself when he's teaching the disciples.

He's reminding them that he has to do this so that they will believe. He is a task to perform. He's the sent one. Death and resurrection, albeit its core.

[15:02] And he speaks in verse 43 with such great authority, doesn't he? He says, Lazarus, come out.

Great. Now, there's a tomb, and there's a body in that tomb for days.

He knew that would be him shortly. And he's reminding his disciples, it's a sign for his disciples and for him, that evil and sin do not have the final word that grace and God does.

He's reminding them on us that things are not as they seem. Things look very bleak. Things are not as they seem. But Jesus was choosing to go, the innocent taking the guilt willingly, freely.

The only person who could have chosen in life not to die, but chose to die.

[16:10] Because it was the only way we could live. So if Lazarus was a sign, the empty tomb on the third day, not Lazarus, Jesus, is the seal.

It's the seal that this was no empty promise, even though the tomb was empty. And that the death that he died wasn't for himself, it's for us and for our guarantee.

That's why the resurrection is so important to the believer. That's why we changed, you know, the day of worship was changed to the first day of the week to record and remember the resurrection. It's because we have this new beginning and death has indeed, as we read at the beginning, lost its sting. That's hugely significant for us, even though its death is an enemy, it's a defeated enemy. Can I say it's still an enemy? Still an enemy, but it's defeated. So for the Christian, the Bible often talks about the Christian's death as falling asleep, because it's a beautiful term.

[17:15] And to be with Christ is far better. And as we were reminded this morning, there will be a new creation when all life will be renewed and weeping will have gone.

That's why these invitations matter. That's why they do. That's why what you're saying and living and living out to your friends is so significant and me for my friends and I can't hide behind being afraid of rejection from them.

It matters because it's so real and because it deals with such significant reality for us all because of hell and because of grace.

So I finished just with Jesus' response to death, which is why we can't be blasé about death even though it's defeated. And this is really good.

In verse 35 we're told with the shortest verse in the Bible, Jesus wept. Why? Well, it doesn't make sense.

[18:25] He's in the cusp of an overwhelming victory. He's going to roll away the stone and Lazarus is going to come out alive.

Why is he weeping? He's weeping because he gets sin. He gets it. He understands it. He understands the ugliness and the evil and the darkness that sin brings into this world, the division, the disintegration and the death.

And he recoils from it in his goodness and in his justice and his love. I want to know a couple of things. There's a really interesting things here. Verse 33, Jesus saw her weeping and he certainly wasn't weeping.

She might have been weeping a few minutes later when Lazarus got up. She was weeping and the Jews had come with her, were also weeping. He was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

Then verse 38 says, Jesus then Jesus deeply moved again came to the tomb. Now, I am no linguist. You know that. But I don't understand why all the English translations use that term deeply moved because it doesn't get across the word that is clearly used in the original because the word that's used means indignant, angry.

[19:53] Now deeply moved is kind of much more gentle, isn't it? You can be deeply moved at something emotionally. And I think, I just wonder what are the translators afraid to attribute anger because the word means literally, and I say this reverently, it means to snort with anger like a horse, to snort in anger.

That's what the word means literally with indignant displeasure that Jesus was snorting with anger at that moment deeply moved by what he saw.

It's the same word that's used in Mark 14 when the people were indignant and snorted in anger at the women who poured out the oil on Jesus' feet. Say, what a waste it could have been given to the poor.

They were snorting in indignant rage. That's the word that's used here of Jesus. He's angry. It's horrible. It's holy rage.

He sees its evil and its destruction. And the problem is that sometimes that we are enured to all of that. We're entertained.

[21:11] Our material lives, our busyness, the million distractions that we have stop us from being angry at the brutality and ugliness and evil of sin and death and injustice.

We don't snort with rage in the face of these things. We're just moseying on down. Life's just one big laugh for us and everything's great.

And the injustice is going on while other people will deal with that. I think snorting with rage like an angry horse is missing in our lives as we see the reality of what sin actually is.

It says it is deeply, deeply moved in the spirit and greatly troubled. And that word means, because we can learn, word studies are important sometimes, and we can learn that this word is something that's much more inner, an agitation, an inner perplexity, a terror.

It's the same word that Jesus goes on to use in a couple of chapters later where he says, don't let your hearts be troubled. Don't be agitated. Don't be anxious. At this moment, he says to disciples as they face the darkness of the cross.

[22 : 34] He is sensing the forsakenness ahead, the mystery and the horror and the powers of darkness enveloping him, the unimaginable desolation of losing the sense of his Father's love, the wrath of God.

And he even, he will know that this great miracle, this great sign will actually be what tips the Pharisees over the edge to say they need to nail him.

So this great sign becomes a sign of death. He raises, but it stamps his own death because the Pharisees says we need to get rid of him now because of what he is and what he's done.

So he sees the hardness and the darkness of the heart. The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked above all things. Who can understand it? He sees that in their response and he is deeply, greatly troubled in his life.

And he wept. He wept. He weeps with those who weep. He's the great answer to Romans 12, 15, that we weep with those who weep.

[23 : 49] He's great empathy for those who are going through the ones he loved, Mary and Martha. He could see the great sorrow and it all cascaded around him in great emotion.

He's not breezing into the situation saying, I've let this happen. It's not really so bad. It's going to turn out for good. I'll just do a great miracle and we'll all be laughing and celebrating.

He's not saying that. He's weeping. He's weeping because a miracle should never make a shrug and say it'll be all right in the night.

He hates death and he hates sin. He's grieved. He's moved into his soul because he could see his trinitarian community imaged in his people being ripped apart by the misery and the ugliness of sin. A humanity that was created to love and belong and serve and glorify and enjoy relationship with him. You could see that was gone. Every single funeral is a desperate reminder to us of that, that things are not as they should be and we would do well to weep with those who weep.

[25 : 07] We would do well to weep with those who weep. It remains an ugly reality even though we can praise God and give thanks for its defeat we should never gloat, we should never be cynical or careless in the face of death.

So the study and sin and miserable as sin was never intended to be an end in itself and that's for sure.

It was only and ever meant to be an opportunity for us to recognize God's diagnosis of our spiritual condition and the shaping of our worldview towards redemption.

That's been the intention. It's not to focus on sin for the sake of it. It's been to, unless we have a clear vision of what it is, grace is meaningless and it's cheap and it's not really significant in our lives.

The joy of forgiveness is shallow and the hope and the peace and the wholeness and the life we're maybe looking for and finding in other places.

[26 : 27] It's meant to push us towards Christ and the sacraments do the same don't they? All the time they do the same. And it's to push us towards the unbreakable value of unity in community because that's what we're created for and sin brings division and disintegration and dis-peace.

Now that is worth sharing. That is worth your friend not speaking to you again as long as we are honest and humble and gracious and gentle and tell them about Jesus because although they might not speak to us again, and I doubt that will be the case, I think they'll come around.

And we've seen God's promises and we've seen He's faithful in His timing, not ours. Amen. Let's pray. Father God, we pray and ask that you would teach us your way, that you would show us that your ways are higher than our ways.

We simply can't imagine Jesus snorting like a wild horse in the face of evil and death. It seems so in Congress to us in our politeness and in our order.

And yet here we have the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords who sees and who knows and who understands where our opposition lies and where our enemy sits and what he strives to do and how we so often fail to see.

[28 : 14] Lord we pray and ask that you would help us to recognize and know and share Jesus' hatred of the destructive power of sin and death and that we would run to you and know that for us all and especially as we get older and we disintegrate humanly that we can be renewed inwardly day by day and that you walk with us through the valley of the shadow and that we know everlasting life in your presence.

It's a great hope and it's a hope that this world does not have. Give us courage and boldness to share it and to pray that your spirit would work in the lives and hearts of people that we know and love and even those that we don't know to bring them to Jesus.

We pray for a great work of your spirit in this city, among all the churches. Thank you for the guys that pray in a Thursday morning church leaders down in Costco there, Costa down in Hannover Street every Thursday morning praying, pleading for the city, pleading for the people that they would come to know Jesus.

And we pray that that would be our experience also in prayer and in answer to that prayer. Amen.