

## **BECOMING EASTER PEOPLE 3: “DEATH AND DYING”**

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Part 3 of this 4-part series has to do with Death and Dying. In week one we discussed Birth and Rebirth and noted that becoming Resurrection or Easter people was a matter of Acknowledging that we have been created by a loving God; Admitting that we are powerless to deal with the reality of our sin; and Accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior to become Born Again.

Last week we discussed the Growth and Harvest stages of becoming Resurrection or Easter people; and we learned that we are to Grow our Faith, Produce a Harvest and Create more Harvesters.

Today is Palm Sunday, the triumphant day we celebrate the grand entry into the Holy City of Jerusalem by Jesus and his faithful entourage. This grand day soon becomes a long week of preparation for a “Good” Friday and ends in ultimate triumphant on Easter Sunday Morning. Today we will focus on Death and Dying as the next inevitable and necessary step on our journey to becoming Easter People. Yes, we know that, were there no Resurrection there would be no Easter, no Christian Church, no individual Christian; but this fact must not be undersold:...without Death...there would be no resurrection. In becoming Easter people we cannot, not deal with Death...and I’m not just talking about Jesus’ death...I will be addressing our own as well. Before we begin I want you to watch a brief interview that reveals just how screwed up most people are concerning the subject of death. (Sermon spice video clip on death)

Today we are going to address three realities of Death and how they impact our own dying, and subsequently, our own living!

### **1. DEATH IS DETERMINED BY GOD**

*You have decided the length of our lives. You know how many months we will live, and we are not given a minute longer. Job 14:5*

This verse summarizes what I have long held to be true: that we are allotted a certain number of days on this earth, and though we may die prior to that allotted or appointed amount; through accident, disease, or despair, we will not live a minute longer than the time God has set, even before our birth, for us to live. Why is this important to consider?

Our modern world, at least in the advanced parts of it, has become fascinated with prolonging our earthly days through medical technologies and advancements; with erasing the wrinkles and signs of aging, with cheating death through exercise and diet, even altering our physical bodies through plastic surgery and replacement parts! It has gotten out of hand and reveals just how far we have strayed from this simple and yet faithful statement that God has numbered our days.

That truth ought not inspire unbridled license in living unrestrained and irresponsible lives, but a recognition that God is still God, and we are not! Death is an inevitable part of living which cannot be denied through the distortions of cosmetic surgeries or covered up with layers of makeup! We are all going to die, some younger, some older, some sooner, some later, some gracefully, and some undignified, some naturally, some illegitimately, some tragically, some triumphantly. What will determine how we will die? Partly at least...this second point.

## **2. DEATH IS DEFINED BY JESUS CHRIST**

I have often espoused from this pulpit that how you live will determine how you will die. If you have been a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, then death will not undo you. If you have lived devoid of any relationship with Jesus Christ, and without any dependence upon God, then your death will likely be accompanied by worry, misunderstanding, misgiving, and often mismanagement.

I'm not trying to say that everyone who has rejected Jesus will die a tortured death; I'm just saying that those who have come to accept and know the reality of their sins forgiven, and have maintained a daily relationship with the one who declared:..."I am the RESURRECTION and the LIFE", that person is more likely to be able to face death with a bit more certainty, and with at the very least a bit more hope! AMEN?

Listen to this passage about death:

*Because God's children are human beings – made of flesh and blood – the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying. Heb. 2: 14-15*

Fear is the greatest emotion we humans associate with death, because everything that we cannot understand or have not experienced most naturally causes us fear. No one but Jesus has fully experienced death and lived (again) to tell about it. Some have passed through the entry point, and come back to report bright lights, long tunnels, and most...a peaceful sense of presence. Those are hopeful thoughts, but why wouldn't we rather cling to the words of the one who not only experienced death, but overcame it! The one who chose death to defeat it! The one who conquered death to eradicate its stranglehold on His creation! The one who lived, died, and lives again has done each to teach all that life and death are just different phases of human existence, and thus, have been stripped of their fear and dread. AMEN? Jesus defines death for those who love Him.

Jesus did something else amazing in his teaching about death. Listen to this story again:

*Jesus replied, "Now the time has come for the Son of Man to enter his glory. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels – a plentiful harvest of new lives. Those who love their lives in this world will lose it. Those who care nothing for their lives in this world will keep it for eternity. John 12: 23-25*

Do you remember last week when I talked about preserving some of the best harvests to be kept in the safest bin in the granary...for spring planting? Sounds like this verse don't you think?

Do you think Jesus is just speaking of his own death, or might he have been trying to include you and me in this equation? Obviously his earthly death has been used by God to 'produce many new kernels – a plentiful harvest of new lives'; that includes you and me, don't you see? But might he be offering here a new and different perspective on death and dying, also for you and me? I believe so.

Because Jesus defines death for all who follow Him, we too have then the power to become useful seeds in growing fruit and producing harvest and creating harvesters, even in our death! See the connection? If we love only this life, if we love only our earthly existence, then death is the ultimate enemy that must be denied, ignored, and even overcome. But if we live for Jesus, and care nothing much about the values and virtues of this earthly existence, exchanging them instead for heavenly and kingdom values and virtues, then death, even our death, becomes just another tool in the creative hand of God, to bring more souls into that kingdom, and more joy into that heaven. WOW! Isn't that amazing?

Death's fear has been defeated, death's reign has been destroyed, death's dread has been undone, and whether I live or die, I care not; Jesus is all I care about!

### **3. DEATH IS DECIDED BY YOU**

I want to shift gears just a minute before we close. There is a kind of spiritual death, related to what we've just been discussing that needs to be developed further. Paul described it this way: *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature...* Col. 3:5 He's speaking of a conscious choice, a willful choice. Jesus described it thusly:

*“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed?”* Luke 9: 23-25

My life verse describes this reality for me:

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Gal. 2:20

It lies within the realm of possibility that each person who has begun with Jesus, will one day face a choice...to go all the way...to take up our own cross...to be crucified with Christ...to decide to die. This death has nothing to do with our bodies, and everything to do with our spirits. This death has nothing to do with growing older, and everything to do with growing deeper. This death has nothing to do with gaining rewards, and everything to do with giving ourselves.

Like Luke Skywalker in this famous scene from Star Wars: The Return of the Jedi; each of us must conquer our most dreaded dragon, must overcome our most beguiling enemy, must slay our most feared foe. Within the training to become a Disciple, not unlike the Jedi, there is a most poignant point where we face down...well just watch, and you'll see. (Fight scene when he cuts the head off Darth Vader, only to discover his own face in the mask.)

Do you see it? In the journey to Jesus there is a death that must be reckoned with...our own. There is no way to fully live for and with Jesus, while we entertain the notion that we can still be our own boss. We have to die to that. There is no way to fully function as a follower of the Savior as long as we believe we can stand or walk on the fence. We have to die to that. There is no way for any intelligent disciple to reconcile human will and Divine will in the same life. We have to choose to die to that. If we want to become Resurrection People, we have to decide to die to our own human passions, pursuits, pleasures and even our own person!

Not everyone is ready to accept this challenge. Most are all too happy to acknowledge God's creative genius that birthed us in His image. Most are all too ready to receive the remedy for our sins. Most of us are overjoyed to accept the free gift of Jesus Christ. Shoot; most of us are ready and willing to do some growing, produce some fruit, and maybe even enlist a few other harvesters. But few are those who accept the call... to come and die.

Following Jesus...all the way...all the way from the curb watching the Palm parade to the seat at the Upper Room table; and eventually on a hill called Calvary, where we... we... we are nailed to a cross along side the other thieves. We must choose death, our death, his death to become ours. We must decide.

My friends, the days of our death are numbered, and the meaning of our death has been defined by Jesus Christ. Therefore; there lies within each of us a choice; will we decide to die to ourselves, or continue to live for ourselves? Will we decide to accept his death and make it our own, or continue to wallow in our wasting away and growing older? Choose...choose...choose...TODAY.

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