

**Home-Coming**  
Psalm 6:4-5  
John 14:1-3  
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See them sitting around a campfire as twilight ushers in the evening. Staring at the coals. The camels rustle, settling down. And the girl speaks. “Where’s grandfather now?” Mother and Father eye each other uneasily, this is one of those questions they dread, having no good answer. They know that to say, “He’s gone,” will only prompt another question: “where?” So Father shrugs and says, “Sheol,” meaning “somewhere, I don’t know where.” Death in ancient lands. Centuries later, Shakespeare would call death, “the undiscover’d country.”(1) For, truth is, no living person knows for sure. You could say, “Death, the true final frontier.” “Where’s grandfather now?” “Sheol.” What more can they say?

Every now and then, on our journey of faith, it helps to stop, sit ourselves on a bench beside the path, and contemplate. Take a moment to ponder “death,” and the whole swirl of issues, the tearing emotions, and, yes, faith’s response to the contradictions it poses. This week, and for the next few weeks, we will explore some of these notions, address some of the fears, and together embrace faith’s hope. We will peer at the condition of death itself, and then look at ways that the faithful might die – a related, but distinct topic. There is the reality of death, yes, but it is always preceded by the act of *dying*. We will explore how *we* might approach our *own* dying, as an act of our faith in Jesus Christ. And then we will also take a look at ways to respond to the dying of others, some ways more helpful than others. Last week we talked about ways to respond to the survivors, family and friends who are grieving. Now, why tackle death, dying, and all that? Well, a flip answer responds, “nobody gets out of this life alive.” But, more deeply, in a society infatuated with youth and radiant *alive-ness*, that avoids downers like death and dying, some of us might still want to hear an honest wrestling with what the faith has to say. All religions must deal with death and the radical questions it raises. The Christian faith is no different. But let’s hear the answer offered by Jesus Christ. That’s what we’ll address. Now, no single sermon – no single sermon-series – can hope to deal with all of the tangled skein of issues related to death. So I will most likely leave out some details – perhaps your favorites. Unless you’d like to stay all day, and into the night.... But today we will make a fair – and biblical! – stab at the notions. What does the Christian faith have to say, not just *about* death, but *to* death?

Well, flip the pages of scripture, and you reap a surprising spread of answers. You stumble across a variety of perspectives, and sometimes verses will even jump up and argue with each other. Who expected that? Early, early in Israel’s sojourn with its God, “Sheol” was the default answer. A word extracted from a root, meaning “question.”(2) The answer to our question – is a question. Where do we go when we die? The earliest scriptures simply point to a place called “sheol.” Job, in his suffering, spoke of the new address of the departed: “As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up; they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.”(7:9-10) Away, they’ve gone away. Where? He shrugs, and says, “Sheol.” The place of no return. That swallows people alive.(Proverbs 1:12) A dark place of eternal silence.(Job 17:13; Psalm 94:17) And even, in one grim glimpse, a place separated from God: “For

in death, there is no remembrance of you,” lamented David to God, “in Sheol who can give you praise?” (Psalm 6:5) In a despondent moment, Psalmist Ethan the Ezrahite cries out, “Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?” (Psalm 89:48) Answer: nobody. Where’s grandfather? “Sheol.” Death swallows us all, and takes us – away. No wonder Paul called death “the last enemy.” (1 Corinthians 15:26) And yet, there are other voices in our scriptures that calmly assure us that death is the normal conclusion to a life well-lived. “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people” – a peaceful fate we should be fortunate enough to share. (Genesis 25:8) So the end came also for Sarah (Genesis 23:1-2), Ishmael (Genesis 25:17), Isaac (Genesis 35:29), Rebekah and Leah (Genesis 49:31), Jacob (Genesis 49:33), and Rachel (Genesis 35:19-20). But Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) somehow bypassed the pangs of death entirely, being whisked up immediately to God. So flip through the scriptures, and you will see a mixed bag. Which may surprise some of us.

And yet, whenever we gather the courage to face the notion of death, we aren’t interested in a mere Bible-study lesson. No, more than the mere ending of brain activity, death is like a huge “NO!” stamped across our life. A stark cancellation, a ravenous power that will swallow us up. Mere “information” withers in the heat of its fierce fire. For it is true that the death of *any* person is an immediate reminder of the fragility of life, and the threat death poses for each one of us — most specifically *me* – the “me” I have to live with. The “me” that is all I have. That banal platitude “we all must die sometime” just doesn’t come within a mile of the realization, when it finally hits deep in my gut that *I will die*, that one day the sun will rise without my presence here on earth. More than that, though, all that I have built up, all that I have worked for, will vanish with my death. Just gone. Every relationship shredded. All my loved ones stripped away from me. All my hopes, gone. Every aspiration whisked away. Maybe worst of all, within a couple of generations I will be totally forgotten. A quick check: how many people do you remember who walked this globe in the year 1822? The real threat of death for any of us is this: *extinction* of me – *and everything I stood for*. Everything I hold dear gone. Meaningless. Worthless. The candle of my existence snuffed out – completely and forever. Nothing I’ve ever said or done matters. I will be no more. Nothing. As if I never existed. That’s the dread we feel in our gut. Oh, Death may indeed come as a “friend” sometimes – a release from suffering, yes – but only when all other options have been exhausted. Paul had it right: death is the final enemy. A *hungry* enemy.

Well, hear the good news. Not “don’t worry, be happy,” ignore the reality. “They’re not really dead,” and all that. No, hear the *real* good news. In Jesus Christ, God chose to *experience death with us*. What? What? God had plans Alpha through Omega, and yet chose to *die*. “Oh, your god died? Some god *you* chose. Who needs that kind of wimpy god?” No, at the Cross, God pushed “I will be your God and you will be my people” all the way to the wall. Now God can say, “I know what it is like. Intimately. No part of your life is beyond the reach of My experience.” And so God has already *personally* traveled the path we must take. Even in the horrendous ravages of death itself, Jesus was “God *with us*.” (Matthew 1:23) No human death is beyond God’s reach – *intentionally*. And Jesus *died*, really and truly. Didn’t play possum. Wasn’t hibernating. Wasn’t playing games. Dead as a doornail. And went down as far as He could go, even to the “spirits in prison.” (1 Peter 3:19) Here we start tiptoeing into the territory of Mystery, for no human tongue can capture the immensity of this act of divine solidarity. Didn’t Paul say, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Romans 8:35) Oh, friends, that’s not even the half of it! Nothing, cries Paul beholding this dazzling vision, *nothing!* Not anything in life, and not even *death*, he

shouts.(Romans 8:38-39) Because the God Who threw together everything in heaven and earth showed, I will be with you, all the way. Even to death. *With* all who must die.

But God did not stop there. God raised up Jesus to new life. A whole new *kind* of life. Paul joins his voice with Isaiah, to proclaim that God has *already* taken action. Isaiah declared the promise: God will destroy “the shroud that is cast over all peoples,” that swallows them into Sheol. For God “will swallow up death forever.”(Isaiah 25:7-8) The swallower . . . will be swallowed up. As John Donne flatly declared: “Death, thou shalt die.”(3) The “last enemy” *will be destroyed*.(1 Corinthians 15:26) The end will not be the End. Resurrection, he says, begins the new beginning, when death will be no more. God got Jesus up, and God will get us up “in that great gettin’ up morning.”(4) A voice will command, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead!”(Ephesians 5:14) And we shall. Not to immortality, as if there is some divine spark hidden in us which cannot die. But rather, in one colossal act of *new* creation, re-creating everything we are, and more. For Resurrection promises not just, “Oh, goodie, we get to live forever.” As if extending the span of our lives were sufficient. No, Resurrection promises that we shall be *re-created*, everything we were meant to be, nothing lost. An Iraq war amputee once asked a pastor, “what about my leg, lost to an IED?” Oh, my dear struggler! Resurrection is *miles* beyond mere “reconstitution.” Think now: what has happened to the material bodies of every one of the billions of human beings who ever walked this earth. “Dust to dust,” right? Disintegration into their component atoms, in fact. Think: what materials have composed your bodies? Only the atoms borrowed from everything that existed, countless ages before you popped onto the scene. What if they demand *their* atoms back from *you* on that great gettin’ up morning?? Who holds ultimate legal title to every stray atom that is buzzing in your body? No, dearly-beloved soldier, please relax. The God Who flung the stars into heaven’s midnight canopy, spun the earth into motion, draped it with surging waters, and pulled land out of them, and filled the earth with everything that creeps, flies, and swims upon it, at Creation; will work a *greater* wonder of New Creation on Resurrection Day. The New and Improved version – everything you were meant to be. And raised not in lonely isolation, but into a forever beloved community. *Together*, with each other and God. *With* us in life, *with* us in death – and *with* us forever, in that promised New Reality that even now is dawning. What else could Jesus have meant, when He said, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also”? The Resurrection is God’s ultimate healing, taking everything that Death’s cruel blade sliced away, and mending it better than it was. Love *will* win. Our rooms are being prepared, and at the Resurrection we will be ushered into our new residence. Together. Welcome to your new neighborhood.

So, yes, we must die. Death is real, and pitiless. That is the truth, hard as diamonds. But we shall *not* be annihilated, lost forever. Hear the words of that Deist Benjamin Franklin, of all people, proclaiming gospel truth. “This will be my epitaph,” said he:

The Body of B. Franklin  
Printer;  
Like the Cover of an old Book,  
Its Contents torn out,  
And stript of its Lettering and Gilding,  
Lies here, Food for Worms.  
But the Work shall not be wholly lost:  
For it will, as he believ’d, appear once more,  
In a new & more perfect Edition,

Corrected and Amended

By the Author.(5)

Where's grandfather? Safe, child. Safe in the hands of God. Amen.

### Notes

(1) Hamlet, III.1.1172.

(2) Theodore J. Lewis, "Dead, Abode of the," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:102.

(3) John Donne, "Holy Sonnets - X," in *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 251.

(4) Azizi Powell, "In That Great Gettin' Up Mornin' (Spiritual lyrics, information, and video)," "Pancocojams" blog, August 12, 2014, accessed online on 8/1/15 at <http://pancocojams.blogspot.com/2014/08/in-that-great-gettin-up-mornin-gabriels.html>

(5) Quoted in "Benjamin Franklin's Funeral and Grave," accessed online on 8/1/15 at <http://www.ushistory.org/franklin/philadelphia/grave.htm>