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“Living Like You’re Dying”

2 Timothy 4:6-8

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As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which God, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for God's appearing.

2 Timothy 4:6-8

In a hospital's intensive care unit, patients in one bed are dying each Sunday at about 11 a.m. This happens several times before the doctors realize it is a trend. They start trying to figure out if something out of the ordinary is happening on Sunday mornings at 11.

A team of experts assembles to investigate. The next Sunday morning, doctors and nurses wait nervously outside the ward to see for themselves. Just as it turns eleven, the janitor enters the ward and unplugs the life support system so that he can run the vacuum.

When we talk about death, we try to keep it light, because death makes us uncomfortable. When asked how they want to die, most people say they want to go in their sleep. This preference for sudden death is new. Through the nineteenth century, Christians feared the quick death people now want. They wanted time to prepare. A good death was one in which you lingered. You grew ill and knew death was imminent. You had time to settle accounts with your debtors, your family, your creator.

In the twentieth century, we began to want to be caught unaware in our sleep, looking for a death that is quick and painless, and for which we cannot prepare. The

truth is most of us do not plan to die at all. We secretly think “so far, so good.”

When we read about the early signs of heart disease—which include snoring, soreness, fatigue—who does not have one of those? —we reflect on what our death will mean to those who love us. We look back at our life and wonder what lies beyond death, but we stop thinking about it as quickly as we can. What we may not see is that not paying attention to death robs us of the ability to live with joy. Ignoring death keeps us from understanding life.

When asked, “How do you find the courage to fly through the air?” the human cannonball replied, “Flying through the air is easy. It’s landing that’s hard.” Most spend the last half of their life quietly, desperately hoping there is a net.

William Sloane Coffin was 79 when he said, “If you don’t come to grips with death early on, but know you’ll die, it will make you insecure. And that’s the worst thing that humans can do, try to secure themselves against insecurity by pretending that life will go on forever.”

Saint Paul faced death with an assurance that is almost unheard of now. The authorship of Second Timothy is debated, but if this letter was not written by Paul, it was written by someone who knew him well. This is the apostle’s last will and testament. He is in a Roman prison awaiting execution.

He looks back over his life and sums it up in three brief sentences: “I fought the good fight. I finished the race. I kept the faith.” He has run a race worth running, fought hard to the end, and served all the way.

All that is left now is the shouting. Paul looks to the

future, “There’s a crown of righteousness waiting.” God will do more than right by everyone who accepts God’s grace. All the death there ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup for those who long for God.

Paul is not morbid or macabre, but he is not sentimental either. He is realistic. He stands on the edge of life, shakes hands with death, and says, “I’m ready.” This way of confronting death, measuring life, and facing the future is impossible without hope for eternity.

Early in the movie *Big Fish*, the young hero is given the opportunity to look into a witch’s glass eye, in which it is said, “You’ll see how your life will end.”

Edward says to the witch, “I was thinking about death and all. About seeing how you’re gonna die. I mean, on one hand, if dying was all you thought about, it could kind of mess you up.

But it could kind of help you, couldn’t it? Because you’d know that everything else you can survive. I guess I’m saying, I’d like to know.”

The old woman lifts her eye patch. Edward sees how he will die. He stares transfixed, perplexed, and amused.

Finally, he says, “So that’s how I go.”

From that moment on, he no longer fears death. He is as good as immortal. Christians can be as good as immortal, because we have hope for the story’s end.

C. S. Lewis repeats this theme again and again. This earthly life is a mere shadow land, but soon we will live in the bright glory of reality.

The Last Battle, the final volume in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, pictures the end of time. Aslan—the lion who represents Jesus—returns, folding all the world into eternity.

In the novel's last pages, Aslan tells Lucy, a child from London, that everyone she knew back in England is dead and raised to new life.

Lewis writes: "The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us, this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they lived happily ever after. But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page. Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before."

If the story goes on, we can live hopefully. Saint Paul stares death in the face. He pictures his life being poured out as a gift to God.

Paul's understanding that he will die leads to a great life. He travels to Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, and Colossae, not to mention side trips to Jerusalem, Cyprus, Crete, Malta, Athens, and Rome. There is hardly a whistle-stop in the Mediterranean world that he does not make it to eventually.

Paul plants churches the way Johnny Appleseed planted trees. Whenever he has ten minutes to spare, he writes letters. He pushes. He coaxes. He comforts. He curses. He bares his soul. He reminisces. He theologizes. He inspires. He exults (Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1975, 1979).

He lives at breakneck speed because he knows he will die.

Knowing that we are going to die can lead to better

lives. When a patient survives a heart attack, their physicians usually suggest changes to diet and exercise. The doctors say that only one in seven makes the needed adjustments to their lifestyle. Even with a bigger-than-life-warning in the form of a heart attack, we are reluctant to change, put what we know into action, and live differently.

A woman who knows she is going to die and lives differently because of it, writes this letter:

“Dear (Jessica),

I’m reading more and dusting less. I’m sitting outside and admiring the view without fussing about the weeds. I’m spending more time with my family and friends and less time working.

I’m not saving anything. We use our good China and crystal for every special event such as losing a pound, getting the sink unstopped, or the first Amaryllis blossom. I wear my good blazer to the market. My theory is that if I look prosperous, I can shell out \$100 for a bag of groceries. I’m not saving my good perfume for special parties, but wearing it for the clerks in the hardware store.

‘Someday’ and ‘one of these days’ are losing their grip on my vocabulary. If it’s worth seeing, hearing, or doing, I want to see, hear, and do it now. I’m not sure what others would’ve done had they known they wouldn’t be here for the tomorrow that we take for granted. I think they would’ve called family members and a few close friends. They might’ve called a few former friends to apologize and mend fences for past squabbles. I like to think they would’ve gone out for Chinese.

It’s those little things left undone that would make me angry if I knew my hours were limited. Angry and sorry

that I didn't tell my husband and parents often enough how much I truly love them. I'm trying hard not to put off, hold back, or save anything that would add laughter and luster.

And every morning when I open my eyes, I tell myself that it's special. Every day, every minute, every breath is a gift from God. I want to live to the fullest and then one day to cooperate gracefully with the inevitable."

When we rest in the arms of God, when we know the Spirit is holding us, we can let go of fear and live with courage. When we realize death is inevitable, we understand that apathy and injustice are not inevitable.

When people are asked to make a bucket list of things they want to do before they die, some of the answers are trivial. Eat rattlesnake. Ride a llama. Go to a game at Yankee Stadium. Meet Adam Driver. Watch every episode of *Yellowstone*. Swim in a pool of golden retriever puppies. Be elected Speaker of the House.

The fact that we are going to die should make our hopes more important. We should aim for things that matter. Work for justice. Feed starving children. Care for our family. Care for someone else's family.

Forgive the one person we were not planning to forgive. Love someone enough to weep when they weep. Show someone who has almost given up how to hope again. Become more like Jesus. Help this church become more like Jesus.

The apostle Paul describes his death as a departure whose time has come. He uses a naval term that means to pull up anchor and sail. The ship pulling away from the shore does not cease to exist. It just moves out of sight. Death is a passing—not out of existence—but out of view.

Beyond what we can see, there is hope. God invites us to live from God to God, in God for eternity, live with faith, and celebrate our days in the comfort of a holy hope.

A woman asks a minister to come and pray with her dying father. When the pastor arrives, he finds the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows. There is an empty chair beside the bed.

The minister assumes that the old man's been told he is coming, "I guess you were expecting me."

"Well, no, who are you?"

The pastor tells him his name and says, "I saw the chair. I figured you knew I was coming."

"Yea, the chair. Would you mind closing the door?"

The minister is not sure why, but he shuts the door.

"I've never told anyone this—not even my daughter—but most of my life I haven't prayed. At church I heard people pray, but I didn't really participate. I didn't even try to pray. Until one day four years ago, my best friend said, 'Prayer is just a conversation with God. Here's what I suggest. Put an empty chair in front of you. With whatever faith you have, imagine God is with you. Speak to God in the same way you're speaking to me right now.' So I tried it. I've been doing it ever since. I'm careful. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd take me to a psychiatrist."

Two days later the daughter calls to tell the minister that her father has died: "I left the house about one o'clock. He called me over to his bedside and told me he loved me and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, he was dead. But there was something strange. Apparently just before my father died, he leaned over and rested his head on the chair beside the bed.

What do you make of that?"

The minister says, "I wish we could all go like that."

God offers the hope that leads to life, now and forever.

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