

Oh Death, Where is Thy Sting?

These are the words spoken by the apostle Paul as recorded in 1Corinthians 15:55. “*O death where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?*” Paul was a special Apostle who, according to Scripture, was chosen by Jesus a short time after Jesus’ ascension from this earth. Jesus personally taught Paul several truths that had not been previously revealed to anyone, not to the other Apostles, nor to the prophets. It was in this context that Paul was able to ask this most famous rhetorical question. It is rhetorical in the sense that from Paul’s perspective, death has no “sting,” that is, it was no horrible affliction or fearful fate to him, because he knew what would follow it, that physical death was nothing more than a release from the confinement of a corrupt flesh into the eternal perfect realm, which God has provided for His chosen, those who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. To Paul, death was preferable than continued physical life, because the “afterlife” was infinitely more desirable than anything this earth has to offer physical man. This is, or should be, the belief and attitude of all redeemed Christians. Unfortunately, this attitude toward death, as Paul expressed, is not at all foreign to many who are not believers in Jesus. Many believe that death is total obliteration, the end of all existence. Others believe in reincarnation, that their souls keep returning as other persons until perhaps they can reach godhood. This, however, comes from a frightening ignorance and rationalization of what follows the last breath. It is especially true of those who are suffering the prolonged agonies of physical pain and have determined that death, which will end the pain, is preferable to continued life as they are experiencing it. Dear God, if only those who are not redeemed in Christ Jesus could know the true consequences of that for which they wish!!!

I believe that anyone who professes to be a redeemed Christian and lives in fear of death does so out of an unconscionable ignorance of Scripture or a potentially dangerous lack of faith in God’s Word. No genuine son or daughter of God the Father should fear death, because they have learned and know the truth that Paul spoke when he said, “*we are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the*

Lord.” (2Corinthians 5:8). Paul elaborated further on his own personal view which is memorialized in Philippians 1:21-24. *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labor: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better; nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.”* What more should any redeemed Christian want? It is not for any of us to determine when to leave, for only God knows when our purpose will have been completed. I expect, however, that He will provide some of us with signs of that completion. I expect that it may be when we perceive that our fruitfulness for Him and usefulness for others is nearing an end. In my personal prayers, I also ask that He guide me to attend to the proper closing of my earthly affairs so that I not leave a mess for those dear ones that I leave behind. If that doesn’t happen through no fault of my own, then I know that He will most perfectly attend to the matter for me.

To my personal reconciliation with death, one could reasonably press the issue and respond to me by saying something like “that is fine for you to say. You are 80 years old, you have already lived beyond the full allotment of life and you have no small children dependant on you. But I am only 20, 40 or 60 years old; should I be ready at this time or any other time to accept death and not be subject to any number of negative emotions such as anxiety, fear and regrets?” No, I can’t say that. I couldn’t even if I knew all about your circumstances. That is why it is a personal issue between you and Jesus. It has to do with the strength of your faith in Him, your knowledge and understanding of His Word, what pain, suffering and neglect your passing might impose on others, etc. If you are a true son or daughter of God, when He calls you, it will be at exactly the moment He has chosen for you to come home to Him. By faith you must believe that whatever “unfinished business” you perceive that only you can finish, will be dealt with by the One who always accomplishes things better than any of us. All that I can say in this respect is that we all should keep earthly affairs as simple as possible, and our souls in such a condition that it doesn’t matter at what moment we face Him at His throne, because there will be nothing we will personally regret or wish to hide from Him. We must believe that He will deal lovingly, and in the best interest of all whom we leave

behind, no matter the seriousness of any circumstances. Complacency about death comes from one's assurance of salvation; the main business of our lives should be preparation for death and the after life it allows to commence.

John Wesley, the author of the popular hymn, "Amazing Grace," once observed that those who fear death have reason to fear death. From Jesus' perspective it is likely that He rejoices whenever one of His own gives up the ghost and comes home. The homecoming of each saved soul represents a step closer to the day when all of the Lord's work here will be finished and He can gather His whole family into the New Jerusalem for the perfect eternal life He has promised. Spurgeon describes the death of a great Christian man named Baxter. When a friend came to see him moments before his last breath, he asked him, "Mr. Baxter, how are you today?" To that Baxter replied with a big smile, "I'm almost well." That is the kind of faith we should all have who know where we are going.