



The death of a Christian

Most of us have, perhaps understandably, a very grim view of death, but in the Bible we find a refreshing and comforting concept of the death of a Christian. In John 11:11-13, Jesus said that his friend Lazarus had 'fallen asleep'. It's clear from the context that Jesus meant that Lazarus was dead. This concept of the death of God's people is common throughout Scripture (Psalm 13:3; Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 15:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

The word 'sleep' is used to show us that death for a Christian is not a terrible experience to be dreaded and feared. The Puritan Matthew Henry said, 'A good Christian, when he dies, does but sleep; he rests from the labours of the day past, and is refreshing himself for the next morning.' J.C. Ryle, the nineteenth-century preacher, said

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints Psalm 116 v15

that sleep 'is a gentle and pathetic way of expressing the most painful of events that can befall man, and a most suitable one, when we remember that after death comes resurrection. In dying we are not annihilated. Like sleepers we lie down, to rise again.' The sleep spoken of is that of the body, not of the soul, and is only applied to the death of believers—never to the death of unbelievers.

Facing death

The prospect of dying may be difficult for the Christian to face, with the pain and anguish that may be involved, but death itself should pose no problem. People without Christ are terrified by death, and quite rightly so; for them, after death there is the judgement. Vavasor Powell, the Welsh Puritan, said, 'The fear of death is engrafted in the common nature of all men, but faith works it out of Christians.' This should be the experience of all believers, but, sadly, it's not always true, and we allow the world's attitude towards death to affect us.

It's not unusual that when a Christian is dying the family will take every precaution to keep the truth from him or her. Why is this? Is death for us so final and awful? If the family is

not Christian and the person who is dying is not a Christian, then we can understand this attitude and the reasoning behind it. It might even be the case that on a rare occasion, in certain circumstances, withholding the truth from a Christian may be wise; but surely this is not generally so. This kind of position makes ministering to the dying saint impossible, because everyone is acting a part and the truth is being suppressed.

What Christians need, above all when we are dying, is to know the love and peace of God. To have the things of God ministered to us is our right and privilege. We must be reminded that death has lost its sting and the grave its victory; we must be shown again that the victory of Christ on our behalf is better than any medication.

What happens when a Christian dies?

Immediately after the death of a Christian, the spirit, saved and washed in the blood of Jesus, goes to heaven. Jesus said to the dying thief beside him, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise', and the apostle Paul could say with every confidence that 'to die is gain'. In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul tells us that to be away

from the body is to be home with the Lord.

The body goes to the grave, to decay and corruption, to await the coming of the Lord and the resurrection. The promise of Jesus is that he will raise us up on the last day (see John 6:39,40,44,54; 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 51-57). At the resurrection, the body and spirit will be united to be for ever with the Lord.

All this means that, for the Christian, death is not some terrifying unknown. We know more about what will happen to us when we die than we do about what will happen to us next year! The Bible says we shall be with the Lord, and we shall be like him. We shall awake to a new day. To quote Matthew Henry again, 'It will be like putting our clothes off to be mended and pressed, ready for the great coronation day.'

If you are interested and would like to know more about this subject, please read Sickness & Death in the Christian Family by Peter Jeffery.

*Even though I walk through
the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

Psalm 23 v4



*Text: Peter Jeffery
Illustrations: Bradley Goodwin*

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