

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #28
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Sermon Summary #28

Yes, We Die, and, No, We Don't John 8:48-59

At precisely this time of year, every year without fail, newspapers, magazines, and numerous TV documentary shows provide a list of the more notable figures, both male and female, who died in the past twelve months. One particular website devoted to religion, listed the more notable deaths in the past decade. I won't mention all of them, but the list was interesting. Heading the list was Billy Graham, who died on February 21, 2018. Second on their list was Muhammad Ali, one of the more famous Muslims in the world and former heavyweight boxing champion. Elie Wiesel, holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner died in 2016. Thus far they've listed a famous Christian, a famous Muslim, and a famous Jew. But they didn't stop there. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the cult known as the Unification Church, passed away at the age of 92 in 2012.

Also on the list was Rachel Held Evans, whom they describe as an "evangelical-turned progressive Christian writer" who died on May 4, 2019. Then, finally, to round out the list of religious leaders, they mentioned Christopher Hitchens, one of the more vocal and volatile of the so-called "angry atheists" who became famous with his book, "God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything." Hitchens died in 2011.

So what are we to make of this? An evangelical Christian, a Muslim, a Jew, a cult leader, a liberal Christian, and an atheist. What do they all share in common? **They all died!** The evangelical Christian wasn't spared the experience of death. Billy Graham died along with the atheist, the Muslim, the Jewish leader, and the cultist. Is there no difference at all in their destinies? There most certainly is.

Whereas all of them, in one sense, died, one of them, in yet another sense, didn't. Now, how can I say this? After all, each of these individuals is six feet under, or in the case of some, reduced to an urn full of ashes. What possible sense can it make to say that yes, we die, but no, we don't? The answer is found in something Jesus says in this paragraph.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death" (John 8:51).

Once again, the religious leaders of his day are outraged at Jesus. They can't believe he would have the audacity to say something that to their way of thinking is utterly ridiculous. After all, as they will say, Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, died. So too did the prophets. Who do you think you are, they ask Jesus, that you would portray yourself as greater than Abraham (v. 53)? Needless to say, this calls for some explanation. I must also provide an explanation for why I can say to all of you today, if you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, **"Yes, you will die, but then again, no, you won't."**

The Opposition Intensifies (v. 48)

I don't mind telling you that I struggle to control my temper when I read a biblical passage like this one today. The reason isn't hard to see. Jesus has come to his own people, the people of Israel. He has come proclaiming the inauguration of the kingdom of God. He has come performing signs and wonders to confirm his identity. He has come offering them eternal life and forgiveness of sins. He has come with a promise that if they will come to him and truly trust and believe him, they will never again experience spiritual thirst or spiritual hunger. He has come with the assurance that if they will believe him and follow him they will definitely be raised again to life in the age to come. He has come with the good news that what he says to them is precisely what Yahweh, God of Israel, has spoken to him and showed him. He has come with the glorious news that if they thirst, they can find in him the water of eternal life and eternal refreshment. He is the light that will bring life and understanding.

But they are deaf to the meaning of Jesus' words. In John 8:47 Jesus said, "the reason why you do not hear" my words "is that you are not of God." They have no saving relationship with God. Their spiritual ears are shut. His words only

offend them. So what is their response? They despised him. They hated him. They slandered him. They accused him of being conceived out of wedlock. “You’re a bastard,” they shouted to his face. They called him a Samaritan and insisted that he must be demonized. And they tried to kill him, failing only because his hour had not yet come.

If we only take into consideration what we’ve seen thus far in John’s gospel, we can’t help but marvel at their opposition. What had he done to deserve this kind of treatment? At the close of chapter four we read about his merciful healing of a young boy who was near death. In chapter five we read about his healing of a man who had been a paralytic for thirty-eight years. In chapter six he generously feeds upwards of 20,000 men, women, and children with only a few loaves of bread and two fish. And yet they can only conclude from this that he is a Samaritan and must have a demon energizing him in what he says and does. Their attempts to refute his claim to being one with the Father had failed. ***So they turn to personal abuse.*** If you can’t refute a man’s arguments, discredit the man! They attempt to do this in two ways:

First, “are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan?” (John 8:48). Why was that such a horrible thing to say? Let me take you back to John 4 and the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. She was horrified when Jesus spoke to her in public. So, too, were his disciples when they returned and found him engaged with her in conversation. Why?

In 722 b.c., Assyria invaded the northern kingdom of Israel and deported most of its citizens. The remnant of those who stayed behind inter-married with pagan Gentiles. They were, therefore, considered “half breeds” by Jews who were determined to marry only other Jews. The Samaritan insisted that the true worship of God should take place in Shechem and not in Jerusalem. They built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim and acknowledged only the Pentateuch as Scripture. ***There developed over time an intense racial and religious animosity between Samaritans and Jews. The Jewish people of the first century looked on Samaritans as ceremonially defiled, racially impure, and religiously heretical.*** Today we refer to that famous story in Luke’s gospel as the parable of the “Good Samaritan.” Most Jews in the first century would have considered this a contradiction in terms. As far as they were concerned, there was no such thing as a “good” Samaritan.

This hostility between Jews and Samaritans was obviously known to this woman. In John 4:9 she responds to the request by Jesus for a drink of water by saying: “How is that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)” The phrase “have no dealings with” is the rendering of a single word in Greek. It literally means, “to use together with.” She is acknowledging that Jews and Samaritans don’t drink from the same well or make use of the same bucket. They do not eat together or drink together.

The enmity between Jews and Samaritans was so intense that if Jewish people had to travel from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, they would first travel east, cross the river Jordan near Jericho, and then journey north before turning west into Galilee, all in order to avoid setting so much as a foot on Samaritan soil. Now, here in v. 48 they aren’t actually suggesting that Jesus was anything other than a Jewish man, born in Bethlehem. They aren’t questioning his ethnic identity. This slanderous comment was simply the best way they knew how to belittle him and impugn his dignity. But it doesn’t stop with that.

Second, look at v. 48 again: “are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and ***have a demon?***” This isn’t the first time this has happened. Back in John 7:20 they accused him of being demonized. And it isn’t the last time either. Later, in John 10:20, we read that “many of them said, ‘He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?’” If that were not enough, in Mark 3:30 we read that the crowds “were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’” Interestingly, Mark uses the imperfect tense. In other words, he doesn’t say that they “said” he has an unclean spirit. Rather, they were repeatedly saying over and over again, he is demonized!

One marvels at the patience of Jesus. That he continues to talk to them, to reason with them, is simply amazing. By now most others would have walked away. Yet all the way to the end, Jesus holds forth hope for them. “If anyone keeps my word,” says Jesus, “he will have eternal life.” And the ***“anyone”*** here includes the very people who accused him of being demonized!

Our Lord’s Response (vv. 49-50)

Jesus says clearly in vv. 49-50, “My claims and my behavior are not the product of arrogance. It isn’t because I’m a Samaritan. Far less is it because I have a demon. The simple fact is that I’m being obedient to my Father. I seek only to honor him by saying to you what he has said to me. I don’t need to defend myself against your blasphemous accusations. I don’t need to vindicate my honor. The Father will take care of that. What you all think of me, ultimately, is irrelevant. God’s approval is the only thing that matters.”

Yes, all will die, but some won’t (v. 51)

It is at this point that Jesus says something that drives them over the edge: “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” (v. 51). Note well: it is “his” word. He doesn’t say “if you keep the word of some religious sage or one of Rome’s political leader.” The “word” which serves to determine life or death is the word of Jesus!

What does it mean to “*keep*” Jesus’ word? It first means to believe it, to affirm that it is true. But it means more than that. It means to abide in it, to remain in the orbit of its influence, to live under its authority and to experience its power. It means to treasure it above the words of anyone else. It means you take steps to embed it within your heart and to inform how you think and to change how you make decisions.

Of course, Jesus doesn’t mean that if you keep his word you will never die physically. He means that physical death is not the end. He means you will never die spiritually. Better still, he means that you will truly and genuinely live forever and ever! Jesus actually uses a double negative here. It should be translated, “he will *never, no, by no means ever* see death!”

He has in mind the sort of life that physical death cannot interrupt or destroy. Later in John 11, Jesus speaks to Martha about the physical death of her brother Lazarus. He says,

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

Billy Graham died. But not really. Yes, he died physically. But he is alive spiritually, even now with Christ in heaven. He is as alive and conscious as he ever was on this earth. Indeed, more so. He is alive in the only sense in which it truly matters: spiritually. His body is dead, lifeless, lying in a coffin in a cemetery. But even his body will one day come alive when Christ raises to life again and glorifies the bodies of all those who have trusted in him.

It is this truth that Jesus speaks in John 8 that enabled Paul to say, “for me, to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Yes, Paul would eventually die. But again, not really. Physically, he died. But physical death was merely the pathway into what is truly life in the presence of Christ in what we call the intermediate state.

Consider my comments at the funeral service of my dad, who passed away in 1983. “Contrary to what you may think you see and know, Charles Storms is not dead!” So, if Charles Storms was not dead at his funeral, and a few months earlier he was not dead as he worked his final days at Halliburton, what happened in between? Did he die? Yes, he died, but no, yet again, he didn’t. He simply passed from this life on earth to eternal life in heaven.

The life you have from God and the fellowship and intimacy you experience with him cannot be broken or terminated or severed. It is eternal. Your body may die. It may cease to function. But your spirit never for so much as a millisecond ceases to live and flourish and enjoy God’s presence.

We so often describe a person who died as having “passed away.” Not so for the Christian. We don’t merely pass “away” we pass into the immediate and joyful and conscious presence of Christ himself! Your passing from death to life has already happened. You will never see or taste death as if it were the final chapter of your existence. It is merely the momentary pathway into life that is truly eternal and unending.

Let me say one more thing. Here again we see that *eternity is a stake in the way we respond to Jesus*. This is no question of minimal importance. What you believe about Jesus and how you respond to Jesus is the single decisive factor in determining where you will spend eternity. Yes, there is a sense in which all mankind will live forever. But the quality of that life is indescribably different. Those who have trusted Jesus and live in the power and under the

influence of his word live forever in eternal bliss. Those who do not also live forever, if it can be called “life,” separated from God and under his judgment.

A Profound Misunderstanding (vv. 52-55)

It’s obvious from what follows in vv. 52-53 that the religious leaders once again have greatly misunderstood what Jesus is saying. Their response in v. 53 is straight to the point: **“Who the heck do you think you are?”** Do you hear what they are saying? Abraham was the greatest of all, yet he died. Moses and Isaiah and Daniel and Hosea were all great prophets of God, yet they died. And now you, Jesus, are telling us that if we will believe you and follow you that we will never die? Who the heck do you think you are? Our Lord’s response is brief and to the point. We see it in vv. 54-55. He says, in effect,

“I have no need to defend myself. I have no need to declare that I’m greater than Abraham and the prophets. I will leave that to the Father. He will glorify me. He will make it known that my glory is greater than all.”

Abraham and Jesus (vv. 56-58)

What follows in our passage is one of the truly monumental and majestic things that Jesus ever said. And it would eventually lead to his execution by crucifixion. Jesus says to them:

“You are enraged with me. You hate me. You despise the works of mercy and kindness and healing and salvation that I perform. You want to kill me for what I say and do. You claim to be Abraham’s children, but let me remind you of something: ‘Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad’ (expanded paraphrase of v. 56).

Scholars differ widely on what Jesus meant by this. When and how did Abraham see Jesus’ day?

(1) Some say that Jesus was one of the three men in Genesis 18 who visited Abraham and conversed with him. But we don’t read of any joy in that encounter, and how could that alleged appearance of Jesus be called his “day”?

(2) Others argue that Abraham saw the birth and life of Jesus from heaven. After all, Abraham was in the presence of God following his physical death. But if this is what Jesus had in mind, why didn’t he use the present tense and say, “Abraham sees / is seeing my day”? Why the past tense “saw”?

(3) Many have argued that Abraham “saw” the day of Jesus when Isaac was born. There is no denying the fact that Abraham saw in Isaac’s miraculous birth the path through which the promised Messiah would come. Abraham interpreted God’s promise in Genesis 15:4-6; 17:1-18 as indicating that in the line of Isaac the Messiah would at length arrive, the one through whom God would truly bless all the nations. After all, we read in Hebrews 11 that Abraham together with the other patriarchs, “all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.” Could this be what is meant by Abraham having seen the day of Jesus and having rejoiced? Possibly.

(4) Still others insist that it wasn’t Isaac’s birth but Abraham’s willingness to offer up Isaac in death on Mt. Moriah that Jesus here has in mind. In other words, we know that when God called Abraham to offer up his most precious son as a sacrifice, it was ultimately a prophetic preview of how God himself would offer up his only-begotten Son on the cross.

(5) Or it may be that Jesus is saying that through some revelatory disclosure God made it clear to Abraham that the Messiah would be born, would live a sinless life, and would die a substitutionary death, only to be raised again to life. In the final analysis, we simply don’t know.

Jesus, the Great “I Am” (vv. 57-58)

As far as the Jewish leaders are concerned, this is more than they can stomach. He’s gone too far, they say to themselves. How can you possibly know what Abraham saw and what brought him joy? You haven’t seen him.

Abraham was born in 2,160 b.c., or thereabouts. But “you are not yet fifty years old” (v. 57). Abraham was buried over 2,000 years ago! How dare you say that you know him or what he was thinking.

They mention being 50 years old because this was the age at which the Levites were compelled to retire from their work in the Temple (Num. 8:23-26). Thus, the age of 50 was when a priest was regarded as attaining seniority. “Jesus, you haven’t even reached seniority, and yet you claim to have seen or known Abraham and are aware of what he saw and felt!” And then he says it:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).

Literally, “before Abraham came to be, I am.” Before Abraham even existed, I am. He is contrasting a mode of being or a mode of existence that had a beginning with a mode of existence that is eternal. The contrast is between existence initiated by birth and uninitiated existence.

There was a time, says Jesus, when Abraham didn’t exist. There was a time in the life of his mother and father when they were not as yet his parents. There was a time when the person named Abraham came into existence. Abraham isn’t eternal. He didn’t exist prior to his conception in the womb of his mother and his physical birth. Prior to that moment, there was no Abraham.

But such is not the case with me, says Jesus. Jesus does *not* say, “Before Abraham was, I was.” He is not pointing to the fact that he existed before Abraham did. He is not simply saying that he was temporally prior to Abraham. The point is that ***Jesus transcends time altogether!***

If Jesus wanted to endorse the belief of the Jehovah’s Witnesses he would have said, “Before Abraham was, I was, that is to say, I was Michael the Archangel. Then I divested myself of my heavenly, spiritual nature and became Jesus.” But that isn’t what he said.

Jesus does not stand within a temporal series of great men beginning with Adam, as if he is comparing himself with Noah and Isaac and Moses and Joshua and Isaiah and Obadiah. No. He belongs to a different order of being altogether. ***The notion of “becoming” doesn’t even apply to the Son of God.***

Now, I know what you’re thinking. “Sam, we just celebrated Christmas! We just celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem. Granted, we acknowledge that he was conceived in the womb of a virgin. But he was still conceived! He was born, was he not?” Yes. But who was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary? The eternal one who always existed as the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, he united himself to human nature and was given birth by Mary.

Let’s be absolutely sure we know what we’re talking about here. ***The birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem was not the beginning to be of the Son of God.*** Yes, you say in response, we know that he was actually conceived around 9 months earlier. True, but even that conception in the womb of Mary was not the beginning to be of the Son of God. The Word, who according to John 1:1, was in the beginning and was with God and was himself God, this Word at a point in time “became flesh” (John 1:14). But this wasn’t the start or the beginning or the first stage in the existence of God the Son, the Word. No, it was simply the point in time at which the eternal Word entered into human history as Jesus of Nazareth.

There is a sense in which it is incorrect to say that Jesus has always existed. The Word has always existed. The Son of God, second person of the Trinity, has always existed. There has never been a time when the Word, the Son of God, didn’t exist. But Jesus, the God-man, the child of Mary, the one in whom there is the union of divine and human natures, didn’t exist until by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit he was conceived in her womb. Little wonder that the apostle Paul exploded with the declaration: “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh!” (1 Tim. 3:16a).

So, don’t ever think that what the angels announced and the shepherds saw with their eyes was the beginning to be of God the Son. No. They saw and witnessed the beginning to be not of God, but of the God-man, Jesus the Messiah.

Without a renewed heart and spiritual eyes, it is little wonder that the religious leaders couldn't understand what Jesus was saying. He was saying to them, and to us, that his identity as the Word who became flesh stands outside of time altogether. December 25th, or whatever date you prefer to identify as the day of his earthly birth, was not the beginning to be of the Son of God. It was rather the beginning to be of the Son of God's existence as the God-man, the union of divine and human in the person of Jesus.

If all that Jesus had said to the religious leaders was something along the lines of: "I am a good and faithful follower of Abraham," or "I am a student of Abraham," or "I am a scholar when it comes to the life and times of Abraham," or "I honor and obey Abraham," they would not have protested. But he says, instead, before there even was an Abraham, I am!

These religious leaders of Israel were extremely familiar with the Old Testament. When they heard Jesus utter this claim, their minds would have raced back over numerous sayings that came from the mouth of Yahweh, one of which is found in the prophecy of Isaiah:

"You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and I am God. Also henceforth I am he; there is none who can deliver from my hand; I work, and who can turn it back?" (Isaiah 43:10-13).

And again, they would not have missed the fact that Jesus was claiming to be the "I am" of Exodus 3.

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations (Exodus 3:13-15).

"I am the great I am," says Jesus. This is a claim for absolute self-existence. He does not say "I am because" or "I am as a result of" or "I am dependent upon" or "I am if certain conditions are met" or any such thing. He owes his existence to no one and nothing outside of himself. He simply is.

The Thwarted Execution of an Alleged Blasphemer (v. 59)

The religious leaders not only were familiar with Isaiah 43 and Exodus 3, but also with Leviticus 24.

"Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death" (Lev. 24:16).

And so they proceeded to do precisely that: "they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple" (John 8:59). Literally, it should probably read, "but Jesus was hidden," most likely by the Father. He blinded the eyes of the religious leaders so that they couldn't see him. He paralyzed the arms and legs of these men so that they could not follow him or lay hands on him." Of course, the time will come when the Father will permit evil men to seize him, but not to be stoned, but crucified.

What will you do with the Eternal Word, made Flesh in the Person of Jesus?

You are no different from Muhammad Ali or Rev. Moon or the atheist Christopher Hitchens. You, like them, will one day die. But if you know Jesus as Savior you are decidedly and eternally different, for your death is in a very real sense no death at all, but simply the pathway into true eternal life. That is why I entitled this message, "Yes, we die, and No, we don't." But you can say this and know it with full assurance only if you know and trust Jesus and keep his word. Will you do that today?