



## Be Not Afraid of Death's Dark Shadows

### Advent Series #3

Hebrews 2:14-15

David Sunday

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Thank You, Jesus, that You will come again. We long for Your appearing. And we thank You that You are Immanuel, our God Who is with us now. Your Holy Spirit is present among us, and within us. So we pray now for the anointing of Your Spirit upon the preaching of Your Word and the hearing of Your Word. Open our eyes, O Lord, that we might see wonderful things. We ask it in Jesus' name, for His glory and for our good. Amen.

Please turn in your Bible to a passage that tells us why Jesus Christ came into the world at Christmas—Hebrews 2:14-15. This passage describes the coming of Jesus into our world and it gives us a reason for His coming that we've heard in some of the songs we've sung this morning. For example, listen to this stanza:

O Come, Thou Dayspring from on high  
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadow put to flight

We sang about it in "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," when we said:

Light and life to all He brings  
Risen with healing in His wings  
Mild He lays His glory by  
Born that man no more may die

We hear it in "Good Christian Men, Rejoice":

Good Christian men, rejoice  
With heart and soul and voice  
Now ye need not fear the grave  
Jesus Christ was born to save

Or consider this verse from "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming":

This Flower, whose fragrance tender  
With sweetness fills the air  
Dispels with glorious splendor  
The darkness everywhere.  
True man, yet very God  
From sin and death He saves us  
And lightens every load

It's been said there are two things a person cannot bear to stare at: the sun and death. We don't like to think about death. But if you trust in Jesus now, you need not fear the grave. Jesus Christ was born to save. So if you trust in Jesus, God says to you today, "Do not be afraid of death's dark shadow." And this is the testimony of God's Word to us in this wonderfully succinct, clear and deep passage: Let's worship God as we hear His Word. Hebrews 2:14-15:

*<sup>14</sup> Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,<sup>15</sup> and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*

### **"We are enslaved to a thousand ways of avoiding this fear of death."**

John Piper says, "The point is not that people are enslaved to a constant conscious fear of dying." That's not what the text is saying. But here's the point. "People are enslaved to a thousand ways of avoiding this fear."

Look at verse 15 again and notice that the text does not say we are enslaved to the fear of death. In other words, most people aren't walking around with some neurotic fear of dying that just consumes all their thoughts to the point they cannot live anymore because they're so afraid of dying. That's not what most people are experiencing. That's not what this text is describing.

So if you think, "Well, I'm not afraid of dying," don't assume this text isn't speaking to you. The text doesn't say we are enslaved to the fear of death; it says we are enslaved by the fear of death, or because of the fear of death. In other words, what it's saying is that fear of death holds us in slavery, but it doesn't often reveal its face. We don't usually know who our slave master is. It uses a lot of "deputy" slave masters, a lot of other taskmasters, and keeps us in slavery through them.

These are things like our addictions or our dysfunctions or our diversions or our distractions. The fear of death exerts the strongest hold over us when it keeps us from looking at

death straight in the face. It doesn't want us to deal directly with death. It wants us to ignore it, avoid it or pretend it doesn't exist. But it holds us in bondage. I think Woody Allen kind of captures the way most people think. He says, "It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." I'd rather not think about it, and I don't really want to experience it.

But once in a while the fear of death jumps right out in our face. I think about a time back in my 20s when I was teaching one of my young cousins how to drive a stick shift. He was a teenager, and we had gone through the back roads of Keenyville, and finally we were ready to go out on Gary Avenue, which was a major road with a lot of trucks going back and forth.

We got out on Gary Avenue—he was driving and I was in the passenger seat—and he came down to Schick Road, a significant intersection. For no apparent reason he decided to make a left turn into the intersection, and there was a semi-truck barreling down toward us. I just grabbed the dashboard and did all I could not to gasp or scream out loud, because I didn't want to startle him and make him pop the clutch. I knew if he did, we would be dead—just like that. I felt that fear of death there. In case you're wondering, I did survive and made it through.

But I don't think that type of experience is what this text is directly addressing. I think the text is not telling us to live recklessly, to throw all caution to the wind. Drive recklessly. Or just eat whatever you want, or develop whatever unhealthy habits you want. What about visiting the Grand Canyon, putting one foot over the edge and seeing how far you can lean forward.

No. The text is not speaking about that natural caution we have that causes us to avoid danger. No matter how careful we are, and no matter how many medical and technological advances we have developed in the 21st century, we can't abolish death. We can't get rid of the fact that we are mortals, that we're like a vapor—here today, gone tomorrow. We are all going to die. This text is speaking to us about this haunting fear we have, the inescapability of our mortality. In the back of our minds, there is this enslaving fear that induces.

The French mathematician Blaise Pascal said something very interesting: "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." Just think about that. "All of our problems stem from our inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

What is Pascal saying there? He's saying human beings are hustling and bustling our way through life, living at a frenzied pace, doing whatever we can to agitate our minds away from having to think about the fact that we are all going to die—and what will become of us after this brief life is done? So we cannot sit in a room alone with our thoughts for very long, because these excruciating thoughts will come into our minds. "How long will I live? What about death? What about life after death?"

So instead of facing those thoughts, here's what we do. We buy more houses, or more clothes, or more toys. We go on more vacations. We throw away demanding relationships and exchange them for newer and more thrilling relationships. We throw ourselves into our careers and amass wealth. We run after fame and crave affection. We demand attention and amuse ourselves to death. We gamble. We drown our sorrows in drink or drugs. We get another cosmetic surgery. And all of this, the Bible says, is driven and fueled by this dark tyrant lurking in the shadows, this grim reaper we do not want to face. We live our whole lives trying to ignore him.

So realize this about people in your life. This could make you a wiser, more compassionate promoter of the gospel. I think about particular people in our lives who I think are doing a whole lot of activity simply to avoid facing their mortality. If we realize that this fear is in people's hearts, and that they're enslaved to this, and they're doing everything they can to avoid it, then as gospel promoters it will become our goal to help "unmask" this fear—gently, I hope—and to show people there is an answer to this haunting, crippling, paralyzing fear that lies at the heart of so much of our busyness and distractibility. We need to help people face their fear of death and realize there's an answer to it.

### **Why we don't want to think about death**

Let's think a little bit about why we don't want to think about this. I jotted down a list of nine reasons why I think human beings are haunted by the fear of death.

1. We wonder what it will be like. Like Woody Allen, we don't want to be there when it happens. Will it be painful? The old medical writer Sir Thomas Brown said, "With what strife and pains we come into the world we know not." In other words, we don't remember the pain we had when we were born. Our mom might remember it, but we don't. "With what strife and pains we come into the world we know not. But 'tis commonly no easy matter to get out of this world." That's what scares us. What will it be like?
2. Will I be all alone?
3. Will I lose my ability to think clearly and to communicate?
4. What lies beyond death?
5. Is it the end? The dark abyss? Annihilation?
6. Does the inevitable reality of my death make my life today meaningless? This is what Tolstoy said is the greatest nagging problem in his mind: is there anything beyond

death that doesn't render what I'm doing right now meaningless? If there's not an answer for life beyond death, Tolstoy said, then I'm not sure we can figure out a reason for existence.

7. What will it be like for my body to lie in the grave? That bothers us sometimes.
8. Will I forever be separated from my loved ones?
9. How will I survive judgment by a God Who knows all about me?

I'm sure if we thought longer, there would be more we could add to that list. It's pretty dreadful to think that way. It's awkward, even offensive. So we do all we can to avoid it. We do not talk about this very much in our world today.

As a pastor, I've had the opportunity to be with quite a few people in their dying days—sometimes in their dying moments. I've seen quite a few people die. I've noticed so many believers die with peace, with hope, with faith.

But sometimes I've been with people who were obviously days away from their death who refused to talk about it, who refused to face it. I find it most troubling to be with someone who professes to be a believer who won't face it, who won't talk about it. A lot of times unbelievers don't want to talk about it or deal with it. You'll look at them and think, "I know they're going to die in just a few days—or sooner—yet they're talking as if they're going to conquer this." Or sometimes I've been with people who are facing death, who are doing all they can to sanitize it—or even to make it humorous. They'll laugh it off, pretending it's no big deal.

There's a movie being released this Friday night—just in time for Christmas—that I intend to see, because I want to better understand how to love my neighbor. I want to be in touch with the longings of the human heart. It's called "Collateral Beauty," starring the great actress Helen Mirren (one of my favorites) and the great actor Will Smith. I saw a little clip about it on CBS News.

In the movie Howard (Will Smith) is a successful New York advertising executive who is devastated because his six-year-old daughter has died. With her death, he retreats from life. He can't make sense of it. So the way he grapples with it is he starts writing letters to the universe, asking questions of the universe. Then he writes to three entities: Time, Love and Death. That's where Helen Mirren comes in. She plays the role of Death.

There's a gripping scene where Will Smith, playing Howard, is sitting on a park bench in New York City and a man comes by walking his dog. Helen Mirren approaches, looks at the dog and says to Howard, "They grieve. Dogs fully understand death." Then she sits down beside

him. She looks in his eyes and says, “You called me a paper tiger in a letter you wrote to me. You said I was pathetic.”

He looks at her, rather bemused, thinking, “Who are you?”

“You don’t remember?” she continues. “You went on about middle management making a deal. Paper tiger. Oh, Howard, it wasn’t that long ago.”

That’s when Howard looks down and notices she’s holding in her hand an envelope with his handwriting on it—addressed to Death. “Where did you get that?” he asks. “Who are you?”

“Who did you write the letter to?” Mirren responds, chuckling.

Howard says, “I wrote the letter to Death.”

Helen Mirren stretches out her hand and says, “Nice to meet you.”

Throughout the rest of the movie, she plays Death and said this on the CBS Morning Show: “I’m trying to make death as alive as possible.” Now, does that capture a longing of the human heart? This is why I think we sometimes need to see movies like this. We need to get in touch with our neighbors. We need to hear how other people are grappling with these realities. She says, “I’m trying to make death as alive as possible.”

I fully expect this movie will be poignant, humorous and haunting—all at the same time. Because deep in everyone’s heart is this longing to find someone who can make death come alive. That’s what we’re longing for: someone who can unlock the shackles of death that we’ve been bound in and who can set us free. I’m going to see the movie, but I doubt there’s an answer there. I doubt the movie knows really how to make death as alive as possible. But God does. Jesus does. The Bible does. So let’s look at what God has done to answer this haunting fear, because this is what Christmas is all about.

### **God’s answer to our haunting fear**

Christmas is God’s answer to our haunting fear of death. Notice that God doesn’t say we should deny death, avoid it, pretend it’s not there, or put a happy face on it. Instead, God says, “Here’s what I’m going to do. I am going to come and look death straight in the eyes. I am going to take death on. I’m going to face everything that scares you about death and I’m going to defeat it. I’m going to do this because I love you.”

These two verses in Hebrews walk us step by step through what God has done to make death come alive again for those who trust in Him.

1. God determined to adopt a holy, happy family. I just love the word there in verse 14, the “children.” It reminds us God wants to be the Father of a great family. To do that, He has adopted a vast number of people from every tribe, language and nation, to give them life—life

that will be forever—so they can live with Him in His presence. He's the Father of many children and He adopted each of us.

2. His Son came to partake of our flesh and blood. That's an important verb there in verse 14. *"He himself likewise partook of the same things."* In other words, He entered into flesh and blood. You and I can't say that. We are flesh and blood. We didn't partake of it. We didn't enter into it. That's just who we are. But He—Christ, the eternal Son Who already existed from all eternity and Who made all things—joined His eternal deity to our frail humanity. He partook of something He was not—our humanity—and joined it to something He always was—His eternal deity. So He is the God/Man.

He did not disdain the virgin's womb. He did not say, "That's beneath Me." He became a helpless, dependent embryo, then a baby, then a little boy, then a man. He became human, with all that being human entails. He shared our weakness, our poverty, our toil, our pain, our exhaustion, our hunger, thirst and sorrow. He shared all our human emotions—and our suffering. He experienced everything there is to experience about being human except sin, because sin really is inhuman. It's not really what God created human beings to experience. He partook of our flesh and blood.

3. He was born with a particular purpose: He was born to die. Do you see that in verse 14? *"He himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death..."* There's the purpose clause. It's the reason He came at Christmas: so that He might die. His death was not an afterthought. It's not a Plan B, an emergency response to an unexpected crisis. No. His death was planned from before the foundation of the world. He came into the world to seek and to save the lost, and to give His life as a ransom for many. What this means is that Christmas exists for the sake of Good Friday. Bethlehem is mile marker number one on the road to Calvary. Jesus came in order to die.

4. He died in order to destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil. We see that at the end of verse 14. If you listen carefully, you'll hear this in a lot of our Christmas songs. First John 3:8, *"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."* We're going to focus more on that next week.

Here's what we need to know from Hebrews 2. When it says He came to destroy the work of the devil, it doesn't mean He put him out of existence. What it means is that Jesus rendered him powerless, and He did that by taking away the one weapon Satan had to use against us—our sin. Because if Satan could drag us into the court of God's judgment and indict us of our sin and hold us guilty before God, then the devil can destroy us because of our sin.

The reason Jesus came was to destroy the work of the devil. He did this by taking our sin and nailing it to the cross. Jesus said, "I'm setting aside that certificate of death that was against you. I'm paying that debt in full, so now sin can no longer accuse you before God's judgment." Now that our sin has been dealt with, Satan has lost his weapon. He can no longer use it against us. He cannot execute us with death anymore, because Jesus has paid for our sin in full.

5. As a result, He delivers us from being held in lifelong slavery by the fear of death. I love how Thomas Watson puts it: "He may look on death with joy who can look on forgiveness with faith." When you know your sins have been forgiven through faith in Jesus, you can look on death with joy. Don't we sing about that?

No guilt in life, no fear in death  
This is the power of Christ in me  
From life's first cry to final breath  
Jesus commands my destiny

(From "In Christ Alone," by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend)

Who is Jesus? We see in Hebrews 2:10, He's our Leader, our Pioneer, our Forerunner. He has gone through the difficult country and led the way. He has gotten safely to the Promised Land—and He's going to lead us there too. Who is Jesus? We see in verse 11 that He's our Sanctifier Who has offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sin, so that we could be set apart as holy in God's eyes. He's our big Brother, as we see in verses 11 through 13, Who defends and protects us, and Who is not ashamed to call us members of His family. And He's our Champion Who has destroyed death itself.

Friends, the devil brought sin to us wrapped up in a pretty little package, and we thought, "Oh, this is going to be great." But he didn't tell us there was a rattlesnake inside. We opened the package and we got bit. That venom runs through our veins and will destroy us. But there is One Who has the anti-venom, Who has died on the cross for us, and Who gives us life eternal.

### **Should we be afraid of death?**

The key question for us today is: Should you be afraid of death? The answer is: it all depends on where you stand with Jesus. Totally. If you don't have Jesus, if you are not trusting in Him, you should be scared, because death is the devil's execution. If there's any sin on you of which the devil can make an accusation, and that sin has not been forgiven by the blood of Jesus because you trusted in what He has done for you, you're saying, "I'm going to stand on my own record." The devil will destroy you and death will be your destiny forever.

At the end of this brief life, it's a fearful prospect to stand before God in judgment as an unforgiven sinner. I plead with you, don't let that be your destiny. God is speaking to you today. You are here today because God wants you to hear that there is a way for you to be delivered from that destiny. Jesus died for you so you can be set free from the condemnation that your sins deserve. And it's free. All you need to do is say, "O Lord, I no longer think of myself as righteous. I'm changing the way I think about myself—and about You. You are holy. I am a sinner. I desperately need You, and I trust in Jesus Who died for me."

If you do that, you do not need to be afraid of death any longer. If you do that—if you're a believer trusting in Jesus—here's what you can know: "Death is only a grim porter to lead us into a stately palace" (Richard Sibbes). That's what death is for a believer. Or listen to Richard Baxter: "If a man who is desperately sick today did believe that he should arise the next morning perfectly healthy, or if a man today in despicable poverty had the assurance that tomorrow he would arise a prince—would he be afraid to go to bed?" No. Because tomorrow is a glorious transformation. And for a believer, death is really just going to sleep in Jesus and waking up in glory to a glorious inheritance.

So we say with the Apostle Paul, "This is our boast. This is our confidence."

*When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)*

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