

Psalm 90

Ockenga Fellows Retreat 3: A Good and Faithful Death¹

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Tonight we are going to talk about death. At the **Ockenga Fellows Retreat** last week we discussed “**Science, Technology, and Healthcare.**” I’m going to cover technology in May but tonight I want to discuss how to die well. By show of hands, who here thought about death this week, either your death or that of a loved one, family member, or friend? A lot of us thought about death this week. **Our culture** doesn’t like to talk about death but what I **like** about **Psalm 90** is that it **freely admits** we are all going to die one day.

Psalm 90:3-6

- 3 You turn people back to dust,
saying, “Return to dust, you mortals.”
- 4 A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.
- 5 Yet you sweep people away in the sleep of death—
they are like the new grass of the morning:
- 6 In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered. (NIV®)

These verses **contrast** our very brief and human lives with that of God who lives forever. In **comparison** to him we are like **grass** that looks fresh and new in the morning but by the time the midday sun shines we’ve withered and become brown. Even the strongest of us who watch our diets and exercise live a brief span. Death comes not only for the old and the sick but for the young and the busy. Car accidents, the flu, a freak accident—we’re all at risk of sudden and unexpected death. As one **biochemist** said, “The human body has so many things that could go wrong that it’s amazing that we are even alive.” So as Christians, what should we do about our approaching death? What’s the right perspective on death? Is there a way to live and die well? Tonight I want to give you **four characteristics of a good and faithful death.**

Trust

In the first two verses of our Psalm we find the **Psalmist Moses** expressing a **deep trust** in the Lord.

Psalm 90:1-2

- 1 Lord, you have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.
- 2 Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the whole world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God. (NIV®)

Moses saw a lot of death as **one generation passed away** in the wilderness because of their sins and another rose up. He also wrote about the generations that had come before when he crafted the **genealogies** in the Pentateuch (all those different times he said “son of” or “begats”). As he did these things he marveled at God’s goodness and that God is our “dwelling place” even in the midst of death. You know that saying “**home** is where the **heart** is?” Moses is saying, “home is where **God** is.” Life after life you’ve been there for

us. **Why** don't we want to die? Because we don't want to leave family and friends, our home, our life. But our true home, our true life, is with God. He's always been there for us and he always will be, even in death.

On Thursday of the retreat we went down to the **Dana-Farber Cancer Institute** in Boston and met the chaplain there, Dr. Walter Moczynski. As he was talking about end of life care for **terminally ill patients** (patients that are going to die) he mentioned a study by Michael and Tracy Balboni. What the Balbonis found was that patients who were dying and who believed in "religious practices (e.g., prayer) and theological beliefs (i.e., a loving God)" pursued **more radical treatment** at the end of their life. Pursuing these radical treatments actually **decreased the quality of life** they had at the end and took away precious time with family members. In other words, something about their faith didn't help them die well.

1. They were six-times more likely to try "life-prolonging measures at the end of life."
2. They were "less likely to have a living will, a health care proxy, or a do-not resuscitate order."
3. They "were three times more likely to receive intensive life-prolonging care (e.g., mechanical ventilation and resuscitation)."
4. They were "nearly two times more likely to die in an intensive care unit" (ICU).²

Those drastic end-of-life procedures **cost a lot of money** and they also hurt those we leave behind.

Likewise, other studies have shown that aggressive care at life's end is associated with poorer patient quality of death and higher rates of patients' family members experiencing pathologic bereavement after their death, including greater rates of major depression disorder, ongoing regrets, and feeling unprepared for the loss. (Reintegrating Care for the Dying, Body and Soul).

You would think that people who are religious and believe in God, Christians, would be the first to **trust** God and be willing to go to him in heaven, but actually we **resist** the most. In fact, "patients with advanced cancer who are **well supported by their religious communities** choose **hospice** care less and **aggressive** medical measures more when they're near death."³ In other words, people who are sick and have a supportive faith-based community, when they're given the opportunity to go to hospice, which is a **home** for the sick and terminally ill that makes **dying as comfortable as possible**, instead choose to stay in the hospital and seek treatment. This actually **prolongs their suffering**. They give **five reasons why** this happens:

1. **We believe and expect God to perform a miracle.** One dying patient put it this way, "Jesus said that if you have belief the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains. I find myself asking, 'Why not me? Why can't I be like the masses that were healed?'"
2. **We interpret giving into death as "abandoning faith or hope in God."**
3. **Through prayer and support the community adds social pressure to the patient to keep fighting.**
4. **We preach that God values life** (like in difficult topics like abortion and euthanasia) **which creates confusion about whether or not it's okay to die.**
5. **We separate the needs of our body from the needs of our soul.** The doctor tells me how to get well and my pastor tells me how to get right with God. But really body and soul go together.

As part of the study they found that when a **medical staff** provided spiritual care and not their normal faith community, terminal patients who believed in God accepted hospice much sooner. That's **not** how it should be. Myself as a pastor and we as the community should be able to walk with each other through death. When her **brother Lazarus** died Jesus **asked Martha an important question** that we should ask ourselves.

John 11:25-26 “Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”” (NIV®)

If we as a church community truly believe that Christ Jesus is the **resurrection**, then a **miraculous healing** is not the most important thing, but going to be with Jesus is. And one day we know we will live again. For the **Ockenga Program** we were assigned to read and bring a quote from the book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* by Atul Gawande. I highly recommend reading it if you have aging parents, are aging yourself, or are going to die one day. In the book he contrasted those who accept they are going to die and so go to **hospice** or **end of life “palliative”** care and those who don’t. This is the quote I read.

In one [medical study], researchers followed 4,493 Medicare patients with either terminal cancer or end-stage congestive heart failure. For the patients with breast cancer, prostate cancer, or colon cancer, the researchers found no difference in survival time between those who went into hospice and those who didn’t. And curiously, for some conditions, hospice care seemed to extend survival. Those with pancreatic cancer gained an average of three weeks, those with lung cancer gained six weeks, and those with congestive heart failure gained three months. The lesson seems almost Zen: you live longer only when you stop trying to live longer.⁴

The author isn’t a Christian. He doesn’t know the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He doesn’t know a God who is a “dwelling place” for generations and generations. But we do. So as Christians, and as part of a Christian community, let’s not only trust that God “can” heal us with a miracle but also that it may be our time to die trusting God. When we go to visit each other at the end of life we shouldn’t rush in saying “God will heal you!” But rather let’s encourage each other to trust God in life and in death. *The first characteristic of a good and faithful death is trust.* The second?

Reconciliation

This Psalm calls us to **be reconciled to God and to each other.**

Psalm 90:7-9

- 7 We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.
8 You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.
9 All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan. (NIV®)

When Moses encounters God he is confronted by all of his sins and it’s terrifying. God reveals all the things in our hearts, all the things we hold onto. During the **Q&A time** with the **chaplain** one of our cohort leaders, **Dr. Kenneth Barnes** asked, “What’s the **most common regret** you hear from people?” The chaplain who has served for **25-years** at Dana Farber said this, “I wish I would have reconciled with others sooner.” He hears from people all the time that it’s such a **relief** to be reconciled from a **bad divorce** or a **strained relationship** with **siblings** and they wish they had done it a year earlier.

If you want to die well, no, if you want to **live well**, get reconciled. Get reconciled **first to God**. One of people’s biggest concerns when dying is making sure they’re right with God. We actually know the right way to do this, the **only way**. Confess your sins to Christ Jesus and receive his forgiveness. He’s the only one who can forgive you and reconcile you to God because the **only one** to truly have a **good and faithful death**.

Acts 4:12 “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” (NIV®)

And then once you’re reconciled to God get reconciled to your family member or church member or friend who you have a broken relationship with. Life’s just too short not to. We **shouldn’t wait** till the end. The Bible calls us to get reconciled **today**. *The first and second characteristics of a good and faithful death are trust and reconciliation.* What’s the third?

Preparation

Psalm 90:10-12

10 Our days may come to seventy years,
or eighty, if our strength endures;
yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.
11 If only we knew the power of your anger!
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due.
12 Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom. (NIV®)

My old pastor called anything past **70 years** a “**bonus round**.” God wants us to number our days. He wants us to get ready for death. Moses lived **120 years** but he still had to face it and so do we. As we prepare to meet God it helps us use our time in this world wisely. That **doesn’t mean do** as much as you can for the Lord. The next couple verses admit how **hopeless** that can **feel**.

But notice that verse 11 talks about the **fear of the Lord**. The fear of the Lord is a theme that pops up all throughout the Old Testament. The fear of the Lord is a healthy **reverence** for him and his **commandments**. When we realize our lives are **short** it helps us realize that **obeying God’s commandments** is what **matters most**. And Jesus tells us the **two greatest** commandments—**love God and love others** (Matthew 22:33-40). We prepare for death by focusing on loving God and loving others every day and leaving the rest up to him.

I think there are two very practical ways we can prepare for death and both love God and love others as part of it. The first is to take the time this week to **map out your funeral**. Dr. Jason McConnel, one of our cohort leaders, said it makes a world of difference when a loved one has died but they’ve said what they want for the funeral beforehand. I’ve printed and put out forms in the bulletin that you can fill out tonight. We’ll keep a **file** on hand here at church with them. It asks these questions:

1. **How do you want to be buried?** Coffin, cremation, green burial?
2. **Where do you want to be buried?** And if you have a specific location, have you paid for it?
3. **What’s the goal of your funeral?** As Christians it should be to share the gospel and glorify God.
4. **What Bible passages would you like read or preached on?**
5. **What hymns or songs would you like sung or played?** We will not be playing *I did it my way*.
6. **Who do you want to do your funeral?** Believe me. I won’t be offended if you would prefer someone besides me. Bernie is great. Any of our elders would do a fantastic job. Maybe you have a pastor in your family or a longtime friend who should do it. I’d list a couple options.
7. **Are there any other specifics?** Who else would you like to participate?

That's a way you can both love God and love others when you pass. The second way I hesitate to mention but Jason thought it was important so I'm going to pass it along. If you are able, **purchase life insurance**. He told us the story of a **27 year old married man** who was a **father** and one day when he was driving home he was **killed by a drunk driver**. This young man had **two million dollars in life insurance** and his wife said something to Jason like, "You know. It won't bring their father back but it will sure make things easier." Life insurance can be **a way** you love your family if the Lord takes you home **suddenly**. *The characteristics of a good and faithful death are trust, reconciliation, preparation and finally...*

Joy

Psalm 90:13-17

13 Relent, Lord! How long will it be?

Have compassion on your servants.

14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

15 Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble.

16 May your deeds be shown to your servants,
your splendor to their children.

17 May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands. (NIV®)

I've always kind of thought this **Psalm ended** in a **sad way**, but as I look at it now I'm **not so sure**. It seems to me that Moses is saying that he sees just how brief life is but he finds joy and gladness and hope in his **relationship** with God. He's choosing to trust God that he doesn't have to have everything **finished** or **figured out**, but God will **complete** the work Moses started. That's a reason to **celebrate**.

We can **resist** and fight death because of a **sense of responsibility**. I need to finish the **ministry** or the **work** I started. I need to **parent** and **care** for my **children**. I need to be there for my **husband or wife**. But what this verse tells us is that if God loves us, he will take care of us and our work. He will take care of our children if we can't be there for them. He will take care of our **unfinished dreams** and **hopes**. He will take care of it. That doesn't mean it will necessarily get done, but that God will take it **where he wants it**. He will accomplish his will. We get to be happy and joyful and to go meet our Savior.

Philippians 1:21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (NIV®)

As Christians we can die differently because of the hope we have in Christ. When we die, if we know Christ, we get to go be with him and there's nothing more joyful than that. Pastor David Coons of Jericho Vermont who is in the Ockenga Fellows Program with me in our closing session shared the story of a **lady** who was a part of their church family whom he **witnessed** die. He said it was just a **different experience**. She was at her home in their **living room** on a **bed** surrounded by **15-20 friends and family** who were singing and **praying** and saying goodbye. After a while she **drifted off** and **died** and instead of everyone leaving they had dinner together and stayed and **talked** and **celebrated** for **three hours**. As the evening went along **closer to 30 people** gathered. It gave them each the opportunity to go in and say **goodbye**. Don't you want to die like that? I do. The **four characteristics** of a good and faithful death are **trust, reconciliation, preparation, and joy**. *As Christians we can die differently because of the hope we have in Christ.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to sermons or to read our story.⁵

¹ Sermon title inspired by a line in the *Reintegrating Care for the Dying, Body and Soul* study.

² Balboni, M., & Balboni, T. (2010). *Reintegrating Care for the Dying, Body and Soul*. Harvard Theological Review, 103(3), 351-364. doi:10.1017/S0017816010000672 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/harvard-theological-review/article/reintegrating-care-for-the-dying-body-and-soul/BCA84755BF11A0987774166199007F2B> Accessed 3/20/2019.

See also the study *Spirituality and religion in oncology* by John Peteet and Michael Balboni. Published 26 April 2013. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.3322/caac.21187> Accessed 3/20/2019.

³ Bradley Ruder, Debra. *Connecting Body and Soul*. John Harvard's Journal. January-February 2017. <https://harvardmagazine.com/2017/01/connecting-body-and-soul> Accessed 3/20/2019.

⁴ Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal* (p. 178). Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition.

⁵ All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.