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Things We Do Not Fully Preach About Preparing to Die

Glenn A. Nielsen

At first glance the topic of this article seems simple. Preparing to die? Well, the important item is faith in Christ. Make sure the relationship with God is right, and then death will take care of itself. The last breath is taken. The heart beats a final time. Death comes and so does the soul's entrance into Jesus's presence. Thus, helping prepare people to die is at the heart a preaching of Law and Gospel so that saving faith is present and life after death is blissful. Convict of sin; proclaim Jesus and his forgiveness. Simple. Or so it seems.

Of course, a more complex aspect could be included, that of helping people prepare to die on a more psychological or personal level. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's work could be considered.¹ A sermon series on overcoming fear, defusing anger, moving beyond bargaining, and facing the reality of death would lead to a stronger personal acceptance of the fate that awaits all of us. Or perhaps a better tactic would be to meet with chaplains who serve in hospice programs. Find out what insights they would be able to give concerning what needs do people have as they prepare to die, and then incorporate some practical how-tos in sermons for people to adopt. I know one such chaplain and his frustration was that people wait too long to enter hospice. By the time he saw them, death was within days, even hours, so the help he was able to bring was short-circuited. Such avoidance certainly indicates a need for helping people to prepare to die, but would a sermon or two be of much assistance when people ignore the advice of pastors and medical personnel concerning hospice? Perhaps, but probably not much.

Now both of these items are important: faith in Christ and personal/psychological wholeness for one's death. But neither is sufficient. Theologically, we need something much more comprehensive than getting someone to life after death. We need something more that informs the whole of preaching rather than only a sermon series or an occasional sermon. What follows attempts to provide a framework for that something more, and we begin with what everyone faces sooner or later: death.

Death: The Last Great Enemy

Paul is powerfully concise. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor 15:26).² Death is not our friend. Death is not a celebration. Death is not natural. Death

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is punishment. Death is the horrendous separation of body and soul. Death is that climatic enemy whose tentacles reach back into our lives in so many hostile ways through sin and demonic evil.

Before I go on, I need to clarify the focus on death. We often speak of different types of death. One is, of course, spiritual death in which the relationship with God is broken. Apart from Christ we are lost and condemned creatures. Another is eternal death, a reference that speaks of the confirmation of that lost and broken relationship for all eternity when one physically dies. Here is where faith in Christ is needed. Spiritual life comes from the Savior. Eternal life is spiritual life that has begun before physical death, most often in baptismal waters, which when someone perseveres in faith, continues for all eternity.

In this article, however, the focus is on physical not spiritual or eternal death as the title indicates. Certainly, the three types are intricately related, but for now, we look at death in its physicality. At the moment of death, life does not merely end but reaches the culmination of death and death's friends' handiwork in the lives of all people, including those in the Lord's church.

Who or what are death's friends? Not us. These are death's friends: child abuse, genocide, starvation, injustice, violence, oppression. Picture the scenes. An eleven-year-old girl sold into prostitution. A woman addicted sells her body for drugs. A soldier rapes in the name of a cause. In one country people throw away half of their food while in other country children stare with vacant eyes and distended stomachs. Someone with money goes free; someone without the resources spends years in prison. Call it injustice. We see abortion clinics where mother and precious child both are sucked up in a culture of death. War and death are best friends as refugee camps grow in number and diseases. So are death and AIDS.

Take a drive through some of our cities' neighborhoods. What do you see? The homeless shivering in the winter and sweating in the heat. Drug deals stealing youth and hope alike. Gunfire breaking the silence. Are you ready to scurry out of the neighborhood to a safer suburban home? Look back as you do and see what death's friends are doing.

A few years ago I went to the emergency room. The first MRI showed a mass on my kidney. It would be twelve hours before a second MRI could be done to identify the precise nature of that mass. Turns out it was an infection instead of cancer. But for twelve hours I knew the fear of death as an enemy. Look in a mirror. The wrinkles and aging cannot be stopped. A tiny virus can take you down. A car accident can maim you for the rest of your life. Pain, sickness, injury, age—we know these as sin's consequences and the allies of an enemy who uses them to put us in the grave.

Death is ruthless. It ambushes some and slowly sucks the life out of others. But it will get you in the end. The death rate is still 100%, unless Jesus returns before you become another statistic. And once death seizes you, it rends asunder what God had put together: body and soul.

Now American culture today does not like to hear this story. We glamorize death in the media or show it on the screens so often we are desensitized to its reality. We try to put a good spin on it with American optimism (“He was in so much pain that death was a blessing.”) We hide it from view and seldom talk about it because it's such

a morbid topic. We rely on funeral homes to make the body look good, even keeping it from becoming the decaying flesh that returns to the dust from whence it came.

So in such a culture of denial about and sugarcoating of death, how do we prepare people to die? Preach death as our enemy. Preach the groaning of creation in death throes (Rom 8:2–23). Preach the physical reality of death and decay. Our people will not hear this message in our culture. They need to hear it in the one place that is committed to being textual/biblical with them—the church.

Defeating the Enemy: I believe in the resurrection of the body.

A focus on the physicality of the death of the body necessitates the redemption of the body. Death is not fully undone when the soul goes to be with Jesus. The death that consigns the body to decay and dust needs to be defeated as well. The Apostles' Creed directs us to the final day resurrection of the body for that victory. So does Paul, “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23).

Unfortunately, that final day resurrection of the body has nearly disappeared from American piety and too much of the church's preaching. What has taken its place? An overwhelming concern for life after death, and not, as N. T. Wright says, life after life after death.³ People and preaching have zeroed in on what Scripture barely mentions—the interim state of the soul—and neglected what Scripture predominantly offers as the Christian's hope—the final day, resurrection of the body, and the new creation of the heavens and earth.

Preaching on the state of the soul in between death and the last day is not wrong by any means, but the tunnel vision which preaches almost exclusively on it is. It is important that people know that life after death is a rest from our labors with Jesus. It is a time of refreshment and joy. It is far better than what we experience now in this life. It is a blissful consciousness of our Savior's loving and protecting presence. Truly, it is a time when the soul rests in peace with Christ while the body is asleep in the grave.

But read through the Bible and you will find that this interim period is not the end. It is more of a temporary state while we wait for Jesus to return in glory when he will fully and finally defeat death. Perhaps even more surprising to most churchgoers today, including many pastors, is that when you dig deep into the Scriptures you don't find much talk about dying and going to heaven. It's just not there like we think it is. Instead, what you come across over and over again is wonderfully consistent with Jesus's words, “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn 6:40).

Yet listen to sermon after sermon today and you will hear almost nothing of the final day resurrection of the body. Rather, people are directed to the state of the soul with Jesus. And such preaching unfortunately, even heretically, does not prepare people to die.

My colleague at Concordia Seminary, Jeff Gibbs, has called attention to the consequences of focusing so extensively on the soul in the interim state. First, he asserts that a false anthropology is at work—the soul is really the immortal part of us. Thus, the body becomes “somewhat unnecessary, really a hindrance, and this view, incredibly, regards

the death of the Christian's body as a victory, as something good rather than as an on-going manifestation of sin and evil." This becomes a form of Gnosticism in which the spiritual is good while the physical "if not bad, is at least indifferent or unimportant."⁴

So what is the final and ultimate victory over death? The last day finds God not abandoning His creation but remaking it. He redeems His creation in its physicality, where space and matter matter. The last day resurrection brings back our bodies with all their senses and members. These bodies will be incorruptible, not subject to disease and decay; we will be transformed like Jesus's glorified body. Justice will finally prevail as all things are made right. You know the phrases—no more tears, no more hunger, no more thirst, no more pain, no more abuse, AIDS, rape, genocide, homelessness, addiction. No more of death's friends to wreak havoc on our bodies. And joyfully, wonderfully—no more death. Indeed, no more death!

Listen to N. T. Wright describe this last day re-creation of our bodies.

We sometimes speak of someone who's been very ill as being a shadow of their former self. If Paul is right, a Christian in the present life is a mere shadow of his or her future self, the self that person will be when the body that God has waiting in his heavenly storeroom is brought out, already made to measure, and put on over the present one—or over the self that will still exist after bodily death. This is where one of the great Easter hymns ["Light's Abode, Celestial Salem"] gets it exactly right.

O how glorious and resplendent
Fragile body, shalt thou be,
When endued with so much beauty,
Full of health, and strong, and free!
Full of vigour, full of pleasure,
Thou shall last eternally.⁵

And all this happens when Jesus comes back to earth (not when we go to heaven). Jesus's return is the biblical answer to death. Even though Jesus will give Martha more than she could have ever imagined with Lazarus's exit from his tomb after four days, her confident hope is for a different day: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (Jn 11:24).

In the face of death, the Christian's confident hope is the same as Martha's—on the last day we will rise again in the resurrection. Hope anticipates. Hope looks forward. Hope eagerly awaits. I haven't seen the cemetery myself, but I've heard of a small, countryside graveyard where one headstone has only one word written on it. What is that word? "Waiting." We simply are not prepared to die unless our hope is the true biblical hope, which is standing on its tiptoes watching and waiting for Jesus's return.

How do we prepare people to die? By proclaiming the victory over death that Jesus's return brings. By taking the friends of death and turning them into defeated foes on the last day. By describing the glories of the resurrection. By reading the Scriptures with an eye toward the last day, the great Day of the Lord, the return of Christ, and

simply declaring what those words say to the people. When you do, you will find this future hope throughout the prophets and apostles, and those who have come after them throughout the ages of the church. That includes us every time we confess: I believe in the resurrection of the body.

First Fruit: Jesus eats a piece of fish.

Yet preparing people to die is not only a forward looking hope, a longing for the “life after life after death.” It looks backward to the ground of that hope. Jesus’ answer to Martha clearly identifies the basis of our hope, of being prepared to die. “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn 11:25).

I wonder if one of the more significant passages in the Bible is also one of the most overlooked. Luke 24:42, “They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.” Post-resurrection Jesus, appearing glorified in the upper room, is not a phantom. He invites the disciples to touch him. Then Jesus goes even further. He eats a piece of fish. For the church, resurrection is bodily, physical, with taste buds and fingertips, with vocal cords and eardrums, with eyes that see and noses that smell the aroma of supper. For the resurrected Jesus ate a piece of fish in the upper room.

Where does that piece of fish take us? Paul shows us: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor 15:22–23). Everything depends on Christ’s resurrection from the dead. If Christ had not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and so is our faith. And Paul was a resurrection preacher. His letters are filled with the resurrection—because he encountered the resurrected Lord on the road to Damascus.⁶

Unfortunately, much preaching today fails to proclaim Christ’s resurrection. Good Friday and his death certainly do. Easter and eating fish—not so much.⁷ Now certainly proclaiming Christ’s sacrificial and forgiving death is good, but failing to proclaim Christ’s first fruits resurrection is not so good. Ken Schurb provides a helpful distinction as to why both are necessary. He says that on Good Friday Christ does so much on our behalf and in our place. Christ does what we cannot do. He pays the price for our sin. He takes the punishment. He dies our death. He goes through hell so we will not have to. He is our substitute. Easter, however, is not so much in our place, substitutionary, but simply on our behalf.⁸ Christ’s resurrection makes possible what we will actually go through. Easter is our promised future present now in Jesus. Christ’s resurrected body is the prototype of what will one day be given to us.

How do we prepare people to die? It is not therapeutic sermons directed to an individual getting ready for the heart to stop. Rather, we need to recover the proclamation of Christ’s resurrection throughout the year. I once heard it said that Sunday is really a little Easter and Easter is just a big Sunday. Indeed, the early church switched the gathering for worship to Sunday because that is the day of resurrection. It is also the eighth day, and a new age has arrived, one that will find its fulfillment on the final day’s appearance of Jesus. We prepare people to die when their hopes are grounded in the resurrection. The confidence to die comes from the first fruit resurrection of our Lord. Listen:

Jesus lives! The vict'ry's won! Death no longer can appall me;
Jesus lives! Death's reign is done! From the grave Christ will recall me.
Brighter scenes will then commence; This shall be my confidence.⁹

Preparing to Die: Glimpses of God's Kingdom Coming Now

In the incarnation, Christ becomes fully human, including the body. His resurrection is bodily. A final day comes when the heavens and earth will be created anew in wonder and splendor. Our hope is for a final day resurrection when death and all its evil friends will no longer haunt us, will no longer be able to touch our resurrected bodies. Underlying all these realities is the affirmation that this creation is God's handiwork. In the beginning God created and it was good, very good. Yes, death and all that is opposed to God has wreaked havoc in God's good creation. But it is still God's creation. And He will redeem it on the last day.

In the meantime, those who live with this future hope are invited, called, and urged to bring glimpses, moments of that hope into this broken world. Paul ends that great resurrection chapter in Corinthians with these words: "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58). Our labor is not in vain. Whatever we do to combat that great enemy death and its wretched friends is not wasted. Rather, acts of kindness for the downtrodden, care for all of God's creation, defense of the oppressed, contributions to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and thousands of other actions of justice and beauty in opposition to the injustice and ugliness of this evil age are not in vain. N. T. Wright asserts that they will make their way, somehow, into God's new world.

You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit—led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrection power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God. God's re-creation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God's people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the spirit in the present is not wasted.¹⁰

So much more could be written about our living in hope by taking seriously the redemption of God's creation at the end—and in our care for it now. But at the heart of the matter is the simple recognition that this creation is not something to be abandoned or given up on or defiled in selfish consumption. It is God's handiwork, ruined to be sure, but still God's, and what he will do at the end is beginning to appear in

those moments when his people now live as his kingdom people and become a part of his answer to the petition, “Thy Kingdom come.”

How do we prepare people to die? By preaching the invitation to join in his work of re-creation now. By sermons that call people to do the work that will not be in vain. By urging them to be kingdom people who stand confident in the face of death and know that whatever is done in opposition to that last great enemy is not wasted.

How do we prepare people to die? Preach the word. Confess the creed. Celebrate the resurrection each Sunday. Pray the church’s prayers. And proclaim what we sing in that great hymn, “For All the Saints.”

And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear that distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.

The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest;
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest.

But, lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day:
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
The King of Glory passes on His way.

From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Alleluia! Alleluia!¹¹

Endnotes

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C3%BCbler-Ross_model for a summary of her work.

² All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

³ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 148.

⁴ Jeff Gibbs, “Regaining Biblical Hope: Restoring the Prominence of the Parousia,” *Concordia Journal* 27/4 (2001): 315–316.

⁵ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 154.

⁶ See my presentation at the Theological Symposium, September 2011, at <http://concordiatheology.org/2012/07/2011-theological-symposium-rediscovering-the-art-of-preaching/> for a fuller discussion of how often Paul makes reference to the resurrection in Romans, and how it impacts the whole of his (and our) theology.

⁷ Ibid. In that presentation, I list a number of reasons for this imbalance in preaching. Some of them are: our default metaphors for the gospel are forensic and sacrificial which come from Good Friday, our art and jewelry direct our attention to the cross, the “Theology of the Cross” by name leaves out the resurrection (which is a part of that theology), we don’t have as many stories from the Bible about the resurrection, we know death much more personally than resurrection, and we simply haven’t developed a robust theology of the resurrection. One more significant reason for the neglect of the resurrection goes back to the nearly exclusive focus on the interim state. The resurrection loses much of its significance if the hope is to just get the soul to be with Jesus after death. But when our hope is for the last day bodily resurrection, then Jesus’ resurrection becomes essential to our preaching.

⁸ Ken Schurb, “The Resurrection in Gospel Proclamation,” *Concordia Journal* 18/1 (1992): 29–30.

⁹ “Jesus Lives! The Victory’s Won,” *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: CPH, 2006): 490:1.

¹⁰ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208–209.

¹¹ *Lutheran Service Book*, 677:5–7.