

“On Death and Dying”

II Timothy 4:6-8

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
May 29, 2005

Have you ever talked to anyone that was dying about dying? I have, several times, which has led to two discoveries. Dying people want to talk about death, especially if it is imminent, and few, if any around them, want to talk to them about dying. For the most part, family members and friends feel that talking about death and dying to a terminally ill loved one strips them of hope. As a result, most choose to skirt the issue.

I don't know if Paul had anyone to talk to about his impending death at the hands of the Roman Emperor, Nero, but he wasn't afraid to write about it to Timothy. Boldly, Paul wrote, “For I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race and I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing” II Timothy 4:6-8.

What was Paul saying to his readers? **He was going to die and knew it.** He did not deny or ignore reality, but confronted it head on. His faith would demand the ultimate sacrifice from him in a culture that would not tolerate diversity or truth. His life was being poured out like the final drink offering in pagan worship and he recognized it. So he wrote about death and dying, his own not someone else's.

In one of my previous pastorates, I announced that I was going to preach a three-week series on “Death and Dying.” I took my cue from the recently published book by the same title by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. After the service, a deacon walked up to me and said he would see me after the series was completed. This subject made him feel very uncomfortable.

Evidently, this attitude is not uncommon for Harvard professor Peter J. Gomes writes in his book, Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, “Though death has been around as long as we have and doubtless will be here after we are gone, we have not yet become comfortable with it. Its actions still defy our powers to add or subtract. Its capricious calling of the high and low, the bright and the dull, the rich and the poor, the good and the bad is about the only thing left in this world to evoke that sense of awe and even primeval fear that links us with our ancestors of the caves and trees.”

Continuing, he wrote, “When anything disturbs us in the Western World, we design an infinitely complex way of isolating it, sterilizing it and making it very clinical. We speak of death in whispers and try to avoid any encounter at all with its grim realities.”

I appreciate Paul's candor about his own death. His words are not sterile or deceptive. They are honest and bold. Remarkably, though, they are not negative, either. I do not sense he is distraught or reeling in despair. **To the contrary, he appears to be calm and hopeful.**

Look at the word that Paul used for death, departure. It was used to describe someone pulling up tent pegs or loosening the ropes from a harbor so a ship could set sail. Departure was a word filled with movement and anticipation, the same way Paul viewed death.

Then he talked about receiving the “crown of righteousness” from the final judge of life, not Nero but God. This was reminiscent of the coveted laurel wreaths that Olympic champions would proudly receive and wear. It was evident that death did not represent the end for Paul, but the beginning of a new and better life.

Let me direct your attention again to Dr. Gomes. “When we come right down to it, the only point to the Christian Gospel, the only authentic and real message that it has to communicate to us, concerns not so much how to live the good life or deal with the bad as it concerns a new attitude toward death. In Christ, we see that death is not the end, that death itself is conquered and that we can share in that promise of newness in life through Christ who conquered death for us.

Therefore, rather than avoid death, the Christian confronts it, accepts it and realizes that death is a comma rather than a period.”

How is this possible? How can we be as calm, confident and hopeful as Paul was when we face death? Let the text answer this. Do the best you can, do all you can and trust Jesus to welcome you home when you leave this world.

“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race and I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing” II Timothy 4:6-8.

Take note of the three things Paul said about his life that gave him peace and hope. “**I have fought a good fight,**” which meant, like an Olympic athlete, he did the best he could each time he took the field. He never showed up unprepared or unwilling to excel.

He “**finished the race,**” which meant that he had staying power. He never rested on previous achievements or missed an opportunity to do more. He did all he could with the time and opportunities given him.

He “**kept the faith,**” which meant he never lost confidence in Jesus. He recognized that the same Jesus that called him on the road to Damascus accompanied him every step of his journey, a pilgrimage that would end in the very presence of God.

At the beginning of this sermon, I asked if you had ever talked to anyone that was dying about dying. I did that a little over a week ago with one of our finest members, Harold Nash. Mr. Nash was in a local hospital suffering from congestive heart failure. The doctor told him on Wednesday that all attempts to help him were futile and he had but a few days to live.

The next day, I pulled up a chair next to his bed and with his faithful wife, Jo, talked to him about death and dying. Few times have I had as candid a discussion with someone about his own death. We reminisced and looked ahead. We talked about life, relationships, faith and his funeral. We laughed and cried and prayed. Through it all, I sensed no fear on Harold’s part, but an immeasurable amount of gratitude, confidence and hope.

Eight days later, Harold died peacefully surrounded by his loving family. His funeral will be tomorrow and I intend to read this passage from Timothy. It describes his life and death. What comfort it will bring all of us. Thanks, Paul, for being bold and honest enough to share it with us.