

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, November 8, 2020

LIVING WITH THE END IN MIND

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

One mother told her nine-year-old, Heather, that in heaven we will have glorified bodies. Heather asked, “Do you think we’ll look like Barbie?”

One Sunday School classroom had several glass prisms hanging from the ceiling. As sunlight poured through the prisms, it caused rainbows to flash across the wall. Observing this, Chris, age four, whose mother had recently died, said, “Know what? My mom’s helping God make those rainbows!”

Brett, aged 5, who frequently went fishing with his dad, told his mother. “If Grandma’s going to heaven with us, God had better have a pretty big fishing rod to haul her in!”

Today we are going to talk about heaven. We’re not going to try, like some of those children, to describe heaven. The truth is that we probably would not do much better than they did. People have all kinds of ideas about life beyond the grave.

We don’t know much about what happens to us after we die. The bible really presents precious few details. Since we have so little hard information about heaven, it would be fruitless to speculate, except there will be no more death, and no more tears. What we’re going to do is celebrate the good news. Life does not end at the grave. We do not lose our loved ones forever to death. Those who die in Christ live with Him forever.

Paul is not writing these words to the Thessalonians to give them a definitive description of the nature of eternity, but to encourage them. Paul writes, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or grieve like the rest who have no hope. We believe Jesus died and rose again, and God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him.” That’s all that matters to St. Paul, and what he wants to communicate to his friends. And that is what he wants to communicate to us as well.

Notice that Paul does not make light of losing a loved one. He does not tell his friends in Thessalonica not to grieve. Grief is one of the most natural, and even essential experiences of life. Watch out for someone who does not grieve when a loved one dies, who always manages to maintain a stiff upper lip, who refuses to shed a tear. Feelings are being stuffed down that need to come out. Someone has wisely said, “Tearless grief bleeds inwardly.”

Psychologist Catherine Sanders lost her 17-year-old in a waterskiing accident. She writes about the importance of expressing grief. She says, “Unfortunately, Jackie Kennedy became the model for so many of us, with her stalwart behavior” after her husband’s assassination.

“So often, she says, “bereaved people I’ve talked with have said they truly tried to behave very bravely, never breaking down in public, never sharing. But sharing and breaking down are part of grief.” They are part of grief. And sometimes anger is part of grief. And sometimes we question God.

Vance Havner is a man of deep faith. Havner hoped his dying wife would be healed through some miracle. But she died, and he was plunged into grief. He simply did not understand why this had happened when it did. Listen to his painful words: “Whoever thinks he has the ways of God conveniently tabulated, analyzed, and correlated with convenient, glib answers to ease every question from aching hearts has not been far in this maze of mystery we call life and death.” Then he adds that God has “no stereotyped way of doing what He does. He delivered Peter from prison, but left John the Baptist in a dungeon to die...I accept,” writes Vance Havner, “whatever He does, however He does it.” That’s where all people of faith end up. We don’t understand, but we accept whatever God does, however God does it.

Some of you will remember C. Everett Koop. A controversial man, Koop was a former United States Surgeon General, our nation’s chief medical officer. Koop first established his reputation as a highly regarded pediatric surgeon whose work frequently brought him into contact with dying children and grieving parents. One day, he learned that his own son had died climbing in the mountains of New Hampshire. In a moving and inspiring portrayal of their grief, Everett Koop and his wife wrote about their sadness, and the faith that sustained them. “Our family life never will be the same,” they wrote, “but we are trusting in the Lord to help us accept the empty place in our family circle, and keep us constantly aware that David is in heaven—which is far better for him.” Like hundreds of parents whom he had counseled, Koop and his wife found a permanent void in their lives after David’s death. “In an effort to be comforting, so many Christians glibly say, “God will fill the void,” they wrote. “Instead, we found the void is really never filled, but God does make the void bearable.”

Paul does not minimize the hurt people feel when they lose a loved one. He does not tell us not to grieve. He simply tells us that we need not grieve in the same way as people “who have no hope.” Christ has conquered death. When we are absent from this body, we will be given a new spiritual body, a glorified body. Not like Barbie perhaps, or Ken—but a perfect body nonetheless. Grieve not as those who have no hope but put your emphasis on living here and now.

If you were to die tomorrow, what would you want people to remember about you? Which of your values do you hope to pass on to your children and grandchildren? For some of us, these are urgent questions.

Imagine being a person of Jewish descent living in Poland in the 1930’s. Nazi forces are advancing across Europe. Jews are being rounded up and arrested. Their possessions are

confiscated, their homes destroyed. Most Jewish people are sent to concentration camps, where they face beatings, torture, forced labor, starvation, and mass executions.

Many of the Jewish people coped with their losses by writing what has been called “ethical will.” Because they no longer had anything of material value to bequeath to future generations, they wrote wills stating who they were, what they value most in life, and the values they wanted to pass on to their children and grandchildren. Many of these “ethical wills” were stored in a synagogue basement, where they were discovered after the war.

What would you include if you were writing an ethical will for your children and grandchildren? If you were to die tomorrow, what would you want people to remember about you? Which of your values would you want to pass on to your heirs? Are you living out those values right now? One of Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is, “Live with the End in Mind.” That’s what we are to do today.

And those of you who have lost someone you love—don’t give up. The person you love is now in Christ’s care. They know a peace and joy unattainable in this world. One day, you’ll be reunited. In the meantime, this sanctuary is a good place to be each week.

On February 1, 2003, the U.S. lost seven astronauts when space shuttle Columbia shattered while re-entering the Earth’s atmosphere. Among those astronauts who lost their lives was commander Rick Husband. In an interview, Husband’s widow, Evelyn Husband, claims that worshipping God provides her with some measure of peace. As she says, “This grieving journey is the hardest thing I have ever been through in my whole life...I haven’t found anything to be a relief, except for when I am worshipping God, and I am in His presence. This is the only place that it doesn’t hurt.” Some of you have already discovered that. St. Paul says to us, “we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of (humanity), who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died, and rose again, and God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him.”

Amen.