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Facing Death Head On

Psalm 90:1-6,12

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You return man to dust and say, "Return, O children of man!" For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

Well, Ash Wednesday has to be one of the most unique days on the church calendar. It's a very unique celebration. It is rooted in the early Jewish and Christian traditions of repentance, humility, sorrow, and remorse. They did this publicly often. Then it was more formalized by the more organized church by the popes in the 600 A.D. through the 1000 A.D. time frame.

When we do celebrate with ashes, we are celebrating biblically from the symbol of ashes: human mourning, human mortality, repentance. These kinds of things are found in many places of Scripture, specifically, most often in Jonah and Job. The statements we refer to when we have the ashes put on our foreheads—"From dust you came, and to dust you shall return"—are found in various parts of the Bible in different ways, different aspects of those same statements.

One of them is found near the very beginning of the Bible. It is after the time when Adam and Eve were created by God. Adam was created from the dust of the ground. God breathed into his nostrils the very breath of life. And they were living in a paradise of sorts in the Garden of Eden. And God had given them one instruction, and the instruction was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life was there also. And God said, if you ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you would surely die.

Along came a serpent one day and tempted Eve and deceived her. And she gave some to her husband, who was there with her. They took and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And their eyes were opened, and they realized they were naked, and they felt ashamed and went into hiding, into darkness. God came to them in grace and called them forth, back into the light, and gave them some

clothes to wear to cover up their shame, to restore to them a little dignity. And then He told them the consequences of their actions.

God spoke to Eve. God spoke to the serpent. And then God spoke to Adam. Here is what He said to Adam: Adam is from adamah, from the clay of the earth. “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife...” Now let’s just stop right there. This does not mean it’s bad to listen to your wife, men. As a matter of fact, we should listen to our wives. We should be quick to listen and slow to speak. The problem here is not that Adam listened to his wife. The problem here is that he listened to her and was not discerning about what she said. “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree which I commanded you not to eat of, cursed is the ground because of you.

“In pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you. And you shall eat of the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.” Life is going to be harder now, Adam. It’s going to be more resistant. It’s going to weaken you. It’s going to wear you down, until you return to the ground. “For out of it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This death won’t be instant, Adam, but it is inevitable. It will come.

It may seem weird to celebrate this. It may seem morbid, worrisome, sadistic, anxiety-producing. But according to the Scriptures, it’s none of that. The Scriptures tell us it’s wise. The Bible tells us in Philippians chapter four to be anxious for nothing. That would include death. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, bring your request to God. And then it says, “The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

And then it says this: once you have found that peace and you’re resting in that peace, free from anxiety and worry and fear, train your mind to think about what’s true. It’ll be good for you to think on what’s true.

There are many things that are true and real. Gravity is real. The wind was real today. Death is real. No, we don’t like to think about it. We don’t like to talk about it. But it’s real. What Moses was doing in Psalm 90 was he was thinking about what’s true. God is eternal. He’s been there from the beginning of time, from infinity past to infinity future, from everlasting to everlasting. He is God. But human beings, they just pop up in the course of time, and then they go back down, like grass rising in the morning and grass fading in the evening.

And then he observes more specifically about this when he says in verse ten, “The years of our life are 70, or even by reason of strength, 80. And then they are soon gone, and we fly away.” The global lifespan is now 71 years. Moses was pretty close. In the United States, men live on average to 78 years. Women live on average to 81 years. The Bible does suggest that we might live up to 120 years in this current fallen state, in the resistance of life, in the decay that’s happening.

Moses wasn’t being morbid. He wasn’t being despairing. He was just simply observing what’s true. King Solomon said this—the wisest man who ever lived—he said, “It’s better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.” This is so contrary to modern wisdom. Basically, he’s saying it’s better to

go to a funeral than to a birthday party. Why? He says, “For death is the destiny of us all, and the living should take this to heart.”

Wise. Maybe you've heard the statement, “Begin with the end in mind.” Maybe you've heard it said, “It's only two things we have to do in life: pay taxes and then die.” It's actually not totally true. You really don't have to pay taxes. You could move somewhere in the bush where they don't charge taxes, and you wouldn't have to pay them. But he was right about the dying.

I walked in here on Sunday morning, and I mentioned the 18-year-old young man to a gentleman sitting in the back row right here, Parker Sutherland, who passed away suddenly here at the University of Northern Iowa. And he looked up at me. He didn't respond with any emotion, and he said, “The young may die, but the old will.”

We don't have to pay taxes, but we do have two things that will happen to all of us: we will die. And then Hebrews 9:27 says we will then face the judgment seat of God. It is wise to begin with the end in mind. The prudent look ahead, Solomon said. They see what's coming, and they prepare themselves for it. And yet we run from this truth.

Hebrews two tells us that there are many people who are held captive by a fear of death. At whatever level, they try to avoid it, they run from it, they deny it, or just by sheer energy they suppress this truth, pretending like it's not coming. But I'll tell you this: it's hard to overcome something you can't confront. It's hard to deal with a problem you won't face or a challenge that you won't look at.

My wife and I have had a few challenges in our marriage over the years. When we run from them or deny them or pretend like they're not there, they just fester around in our hearts. Confronting our discomforts, whether they're relational, health-oriented, or financial, is a way of dealing with them head-on. But there are good and bad ways of dealing with challenges.

If you face the challenge of a car that has run out of gas—like I saw a person do not long ago—with a pitcher of water that you pour in the gas tank, you're not going to get very far. If you face an electrical challenge in life, with some issues in electrical wiring, with your bare hands, you may encounter not a fixing of the problem, but some new problems to deal with. And if you face death without the right revelation, it may do more harm for you than good.

And so, if we want to face death well—and this is what the Bible does for us—it helps us face the sufferings and the pains and the hurts and the heartaches and the final destination of life well. To do this well, we must face the reality of death with the power and the hope of the gospel firmly planted in our souls by faith. And then we can face death with great hope.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel,” the Apostle Paul said. “I'm not ashamed of the good news of Jesus, for it is the power of God unto the salvation of all people.” Salvation is found in no one else. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we can be saved. The gospel is the good news of Jesus, and it fixes the main problems of humanity: the problem of sin, the problem of Satan, and the problem of death.

When Jesus went to the cross, He took our sins in His body on a tree—this self-destructive nature that's inside of each of us, from which we're suffering all these consequences and the groaning here on the earth. Christ took them on the cross for us. “For God so loved the world, He sent His one and only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish or be separated from God, but should have everlasting life.”

He conquered Satan at the cross. And then on Easter Sunday morning, when He was resurrected, He conquered the power of death for you and for me. When we go to the face and the doorway of death with the gospel in our hands, we begin to understand we're just walking through a passageway. And when we know Him, He said He will be there in the presence of our enemies. He will anoint our heads with oil. He will prepare a table for us there, and our cup will overflow forever.

We will be moving into a promotion when we have the gospel—the good news of Jesus—planted deep in our hearts. Oh, how our world needs the gospel. But how can we know, and how can they know, unless someone tells us?

To do it well, we must have a firm grasp on the good news of Jesus. And then, friends, when His peace settles over us and we're free from the fear of death, and the sting of death has been removed, and we have that intrinsic hope reveling in our hearts, then we can live.

And this is where Moses prayed. After dealing with the reality of God's eternal nature and our temporary nature, and the coming doorway of moving from this life into the next, Moses began to pray about this life. And he said, “Teach us, Lord, to number our days. Teach us that we may live them with a heart of wisdom.”

He went on to pray, “Establish the work of our hands. Yes, establish the work of our hands. Make us fruitful. Make us glad. Set us free from all of these things, that we might be productive here, fruitful here, that we might do some good this side of eternity.”

You and I were put here, planted here by God. You're not a mistake. God sent you into this world to leave a mark, to do good—good that would last forever. The Bible says at one point that's what Jesus did: He just went around doing good. Not because He was trying to please God—God already loved Him. He was already on His way to eternity. He was doing good because that's why He was here. And He was doing it out of the love of His Father and this assurance and security He knew, because that's what the gospel sets us free to do.

And so I ask you these questions tonight in a very tangible way: if your life were weighed in the balance, would you say you're bringing more good than bad? We're all a mix of both. I cast a dark shadow at times, and when I become aware of it, it's appropriate for me to repent and ask God if He could help me do better, be more fruitful, and do more good.

Is your life, if it were weighed in a balance, bringing more good than bad? That might be a good question to ask God. And then, if He shows you, before you come to the table, what might you need to repent of before Him?

Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, as we begin these 40 days of Lent, I thank You that You give us reminders in Your Word. We do know what happens on Easter Sunday morning, and we can live in great celebration. But sometimes You work in our lives to give us an awareness of where we're really at with You and help us understand, spiritually, our need.

And I would pray that as we come before the communion table tonight, and we take into ourselves the gift of Your Son—the gift of His body being broken for us in place of us, the gift of His blood being shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins—I pray that You would also be purifying our hearts, and that we would come before You appropriately, in whatever ways we need to express our godly sorrow before You, and that through our repentance we would continue to bear that resurrection fruit in our lives, and that we, as a people here, see You do more through us and bear more fruit.

Be pleased, Father, with our hearts as we celebrate Your gift. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.