

# ***Finite Living - Speak***

**Psalm 90:12**

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It was one of the hardest phone calls I've had to field in a long time. He was on the other end of the line, alternately talking clear and calm, and then dropping the phone as he broke into deep, deep sobs.

The love of his life was dying.

He was calling to begin funeral preparations.

Neither of them were that old. And standing at the brink of death so early in their relationship was something neither of them had counted on. Till the disease intervened.

So he called me.

Painful, it was. The worst part, I think, was how hard he worked to avoid using the word "death." Come to think of it, I'm not sure he uttered the word at all. There were pauses, grunts, talk about "when we'll need your services, Rev. Gehrels", or "when the moment comes" or "that time."

Did whatever he had to do to limbo under naming that inevitable and quickly approaching confrontation with the grim reaper.

Peter isn't alone in the way he squirmed when faced with death.

I remember Michelle. Her grandparents had lived to a ripe old age. Her father was well into his eighties, and didn't look a day over 65. And so Michelle figured that she'd be living till well over 100. Drank her carrot juice and ate her bean sprouts and all sorts of unmentionable supplements with total diligence. Didn't want to talk about death. Wrote off everyone who did as weak, or insecure.

Peter and Michelle are pretty much in the majority in our culture. We are a society that is profoundly uncomfortable with death - at least with the close up, personal encounter with death. We seem to have no trouble watching people get blown up on TV or butchered in video games or turning our back on nations filled with starving millions. But when death approaches us personally, it becomes very different.

We have sanitized death - removing it from our living rooms to funeral parlours, from our bedrooms to hospitals or nursing homes. Gone are the days when grandma would live with the family till she died. Gone are the days when Uncle Paddy's body would be laid out in the front room while neighbours came to pay their last respects, before slipping into the kitchen for a social nip from the jug before heading home.

In fact, it is growing increasingly common that funeral homes are notified of a death, and are told to attend to disposition..... period. No visiting. No notice in the paper. No memorial service. Just gone. A complete avoidance manoeuvre on the part of those left behind.

The Bible's approach is anything but evasive when it comes to the topic of death. It is very blunt about the fact that our lives are finite. Our lives are not all that strong. They are not terribly secure. And there are no guarantees. Deal with it.

As one person put it, "Life is a terminal disease. We've all got it. Get used to it."

Hear the echos from Psalm 90 -

we're turned back to dust

our lives like a mere watch in the night

swept away as quickly as a dream

as short as the bloom of a daylily

coming to an end with a sigh

seventy, maybe eighty years - and most of them filled with potholes

And faced with all that the Psalm writer prays, verse 12:

*So teach us to count our days  
that we may gain a wise heart.*

There's nothing wise about ignoring the fact that life is only so long and not one minute more. When it comes to death, procrastination in preparation is NOT helpful.

Teach us to count our days,  
that we may gain a wise heart.

Look at your life.

Lord, help me to see my life in the context of human history and in view of the goings on of the rest of my neighbours on this planet.

Then help me to live accordingly.

Teach me to count my days...

Oh, how quickly I could become cynical about the whole business.

For if that little life of mine were just a passing bit of fluff in the wind

if my moments did, indeed, pass like the lily bloom, and vanish forever

if they mattered no more than a puppy's loss of milk teeth matters

then any thought of death would be downright creepy.

Then I might as well pay full attention to sucking the most out of those few moments that I've got on this crazy trip round the track of life.

Aiming perhaps for maximum personal pleasure.

Or aiming for creating a legacy that will outlast my bag of bones.

Or whatever - just make the most of it.

'Cause it's all I've got.

But -

*Teach me to count my days...*

As Christians who believe that the Son of God really did come at Christmas,

that he lived like we do

and encountered death like we all will

that counting of days changes.

It changes because Jesus' encounter with death was radically different than any encounter before. And his encounter changes every encounter with death that comes after.

Including ours.

Which is why St. John writes in his first epistle, 5:13:

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the son of God so that you may **KNOW**  
that you have eternal life.*

Hah!

Take that, death!

Life beyond the grave - eternally so!

Ours as a grace gift through the saving work of Jesus.

So Jesus can say to the dying criminal on the cross beside him -  
in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)

**"today** you will be with me

2 Corinthians 5:8 tells us that those who die as believers in Jesus experience a state of living where we are *“away from the body and ... at home with the Lord.”*

Our bodies rest, and decay in the dirt.

That's all very real.

When the tractor comes and puts the heavy lid on the vault, it's all real.

But it is a reality that does not have the last word.

There is more.

Our souls live in the rest and peace of God's presence in heaven.

And even that is not the end of the story.

No more the end than the planting of a seed is the end of a gardener's story.

We believe that Christ is raised.

He is the first fruits of those who have died. He sets the trend for all who believe in him to follow.

He blazes the trail that we will later walk across.

And what a trail it will be.

What a glorious existence that will be.

Like the seed - in some way the plant is connected.

But better, oh so much better.

You know, the little kid had it right.

He had been to a family funeral the week before. At school his first grade class was studying plants.

One day, as they drove past a cemetery, he piped up:

*“Hey, mom, that's where they plant people.”*

That's pretty good theology; good Biblical eschatology.

Not bad for grade one, eh?

Perhaps you've heard the story about the matron of the family unit who was coming towards the end of her life. She had the rare privilege of being able to talk about her last wishes with her family. As the children gathered round, with a weak voice and a smile she shared how she'd envisioned her funeral happening. Hymns, scripture readings.

And then she said - *“When you hold the wake, make sure there's a fork in my hand.”*

*“Mother, a **fork**?”*

*“Remember what I would tell you after Sunday dinner? When we'd clear the table, what did I say?”*

*“Keep your fork for dessert, the best is yet to come.”*

*“Son, when people see the fork in my hand, tell them -*

*- the best is yet to come.”*

The best. Coming.

A taste when we leave this earth and go to heaven.

But then the full banquet when Jesus returns to earth and ushers in the New Creation - new heaven and new earth.

No more death, no more sorrow, no more pain, no more tears.

All that old order business will be replaced.

1 Corinthians 15 puts it this way in verse 42 and following:

Changed from perishable to imperishable;

from dishonor to glory;

from weakness to power;

from natural to spiritual.

Our bodies will be changed

from bodies that grow weaker and wear out  
to bodies that will live in strength forever

from bodies that are rather frail, even homely and embarrassing  
to bodies that will be radiant and perfect

from bodies that are weak  
to bodies that are powerful

from bodies that have real limitations  
to bodies that will have supernatural capabilities beyond what we could even dream  
or hope.

Perishable, dishonor; weakness, natural – how well we know it.

In little ways we relate as we wake up and find muscles aching that hadn't ached a few years ago.  
Or we now need glasses to read.  
Or a cane to walk.

Perhaps in big ways we relate:

The person who keeps popping tylenol 3's just to keep going.

The one wrestling with an undiagnosed disease that robs him of free mobility.

The one who just had a heart attack.

The loved one whose mind is ill.

The person who can't relate to the concept of good health because they've always been  
struggling with pain and disability and weakness.

Dishonor, weakness, natural.

That's the stuff of Psalm 90.

But even Psalm 90 doesn't end there.

It concludes with these words:

*Let your work be manifest to your servants,  
and your glorious power to their children.*

*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us.  
and prosper for us the work of our hands -*

*O prosper the work of our hands!*

God's greatest work was accomplished through Jesus.  
His eternal power overcomes death and gives us eternal life.  
Which is the greatest favor anyone can ever know.

Which also means that the work we do with our hands matters.

As 1 Cor 15:58 says:

*Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord,  
because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

Which means that we don't have to run away from death.  
Or pretend that it doesn't exist.  
Or avoid speaking the word.

In fact, by being willing to speak about our inevitable encounter with death as a natural part of our future,

as something non-frightening

as OK

speaking like that with those around us

is probably one of the biggest favors we can do to our death-denying culture.

It struck me again a few months ago when I had to spend some time with a genetics counselor because of some family testing I'd been going through.

The reality of life's final boundary came up.

And it was so obvious that she wasn't fully comfortable with it.

Out came the euphemisms.

It really struck me - even the professionals have trouble with this death thing.

Talk about death, friends.

Don't shy away from it.

And, please, also prepare for it.

I'm not talking just spiritual preparation.

The gang headed to Peru is busy making preparations for the trip.

When you were travelling over Christmas, you made preparations.

Lists of what to pack.

Phone numbers of where you'll be.

Arrangements with the neighbor to pick up the mail and shovel the drive.

We ought to do the same for our last great earthly trip - the one to heaven.

Have you got your financial affairs in order?

What about legal plans?

Do you have medical and health care decisions in place - living wills, power of attorney, that sort of things?

Have you thought about funeral plans?

Perhaps prearrangements.

Many people in this congregation have been gunshy about doing so, but then felt very relieved once they did it. And, let me tell you, families are DEEPLY grateful when such prearrangements have been made.

And, friends, be open about it.

Not that everyone needs to know all your details.

But know that you're aware of the end of life.

And that you're comfortable with it.

And that you've planned for it.

And if you can share these things, do so with a prayer that the Holy Spirit will open a moment where the one with whom you share will ask **why** -

why it is that you can be so candid and comfortable with something that totally flustered Peter and Michelle and countless others.

That perhaps they, too, will come to know Jesus.

And come to be comfortable with life and death and eternity.

And be able to number their days in the best possible way.