



Pastor's Pen

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Recent Reflections on Life and Death

As you read this, I am off in the field with an engineer battalion dealing with the sand, the sweat, the weather, the joy of army cooking and all that goes with living in a field setting for a few days while ministering to soldiers. In some respects, it is good for me to get out into nature on a regular basis (even if it is with a couple of hundred "roommates") and provide practical ministry under clouds, tree branches and stars to folks from all levels of society. After helping three families deal with the deaths their loved ones over the course of a week, it is good to get away and see people living and working hard to survive. It is beneficial for me to work with them as we strive together to accomplish the living tasks that have been put before us. In the midst of these tasks, I too find myself dealing with the needs of life while also reflecting back on the recent subject of death -- trying to keep it all in its proper perspective. To help with this I turn to the words of the apostle Paul.

Paul thought about and dealt with the paradox of life and death for the Christian. For him, to live was to be on earth and be busy for Christ, while to die was to be in the presence of the Lord. For Paul, he saw it a win, win situation no matter what happened to him. However, most people don't see it that way in today's world. When death comes, they look for caring actions and they seek for words of comfort in those hard times. That too is a part of our Christian duties for others: to help bring them hope and comfort even in the face of death.

So in hard times and when death is present, how do we comfort each other? Sometimes we do it without any words. We hug, hold hands, we offer a sympathetic look. Sometimes those things help as much or more than what we might say with mere words. Indeed, the reason we often come together in times of trouble isn't so much to say anything as to just show we care by being with one another.

Of course, words can help as well. Strange as it sounds, death is a fact of life. We weren't meant to live on this earth forever. Sometimes, death comes as blessing, a relief that a loved one didn't linger and suffer any longer than they did. Those words help some too, but only a little.

Frankly, if we weren't people of faith, there would be little else to provide comfort, but praise God, we do have something more. We have the promises of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

One night, near the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus explained to his twelve disciples that he was about to die. As might be expected, they didn't want to hear it. But he persisted and told them not to worry. Jesus said he wouldn't just leave them. He'd send a Companion, a Guide, a Helper, the Holy Spirit, The Comforter. In fact, Jesus uses the same word to describe the Holy Spirit as Paul used in 1 Thessalonians 4 when he wrote, "Comfort one another with these words."

What words are we to comfort one another with? Certainly not simple eulogies or empty platitudes. No, Paul had in mind a promise. The promise that death isn't an ending, but rather it is the beginning of a spectacular new mode of existence: life in the Lord's presence. That's why Jesus could say at a different gathering that "I am the

resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live" (John 11:25). Death isn't the end, and that's a real comfort!

More than 400 years ago, during great theological conflict, a young pastor and a young professor were asked by their German governor to put on paper just what Reformed Christians believed. They were asked to write it all in simple terms so the next generation wouldn't have all this trouble of dealing with a lot of theological terms to try to express the basics of what they believe.

The result of their work is the Heidelberg Catechism, 129 questions and answers that provide an overview of their faith. They're interesting to read and think about, but for me, the very first question and answer make an interesting observation: That first question is: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

The answer: "That I belong - body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself, but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ who, at the cost of his own blood, has fully paid for all my sins ... that he protects me so well that, without the will of my Father in heaven, not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him."

Comfort, I belong to Jesus, and as we read in Romans 8, nothing can ever change that - not even death. That fact makes all the difference, not only in this world, but also in the world to come.

What do we really know about life and death? We know that for those who have gone before us and into paradise there is no more pain, no more sorrow, and one day, a joyous reunion. Those aren't just idle words. They're the everlasting promises of an Almighty God, and so in obedience to our Lord: "Comfort one another with these words."

Blessings and comfort to you all,

James