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Death and Dying: Life Lessons From Jesus (From New Testament Alive: The Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke & John – Volume I)

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Luke Chapter 23

DEATH AND DYING: LIFE LESSONS FROM JESUS

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things. (Luke 23: 46-49)

Jesus' Crucifixion and Death

Luke describes the final details of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Jesus is brought before Pontius Pilate. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, who has wanted to kill Him for quite some time. They finally meet face-to-face. Jesus is questioned and found innocent of all charges. Jesus winds up back in Pilate's court. He's found innocent again. The chief priests and the scribes demand His crucifixion. The crowd jeers. Pilate is a people-pleaser and is concerned with public opinion more than he is about doing what is right. Pilate concedes. He relinquishes to the crowd's unjust demands and releases a convicted murderer in order to murder an innocent man. The crowd roars, "Crucify him!"

Jesus is led away to the "Place of the Skull" to be crucified along with two other criminals. Jesus forgives His accusers, executioners, and a repentant thief on the cross. Paradise is mentioned. Jesus praises His Father in heaven and then dies. The curtain in the Temple is torn in two, signifying that the Old Covenant (the Old Testament law and priestly sacrifices) has been fulfilled and the New Covenant (the New Testament grace that Jesus offers by forgiving our sins because of His once-and-for-all sacrificial death on the cross) has begun.

The chapter concludes as many in the crowd now believe Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah: God's one and only Son. Jesus' body is taken from the cross and undergoes a type of Israelite embalming process. He is buried in a tomb. Witnesses watch the process. His tomb is sealed.

As I reflect on this chapter, my heart is grateful for Jesus and for the amazing bravery He displayed as He faced His own death. Emotionally speaking, Jesus probably began His own death and dying process three years earlier. It's clear, in the gospel accounts, that He accepted His manner of death by crucifixion as inevitable in order to fulfill God's plan to redeem sinful humanity from its fallen and lost state.

Not only was Jesus fully God, but He was fully human. Embedded within His full humanity, Jesus' death continues to teach us not just about the way of salvation, but also about the dying process we will face as we deal with our own death and the deaths of those we love. Although we will

probably never die on a cross, we will all die. Death is a part of life. Jesus models how to live, but he even teaches us as He dies.

Death and Dying

Not all of us will go through a "process" of dying; God will welcome some of us home suddenly. But no matter how fast or drawn out death is for each of us, we'll all probably watch someone we love go through the dying process. God invites us to move beyond the fear of death and to embrace it (and to help others face death) with grace, strength, and with His eternal perspective. Let me begin by sharing some things I've learned about death and dying from the life of Jesus:

1. As we face death, we must each place our lives into God's hands and trust His will. Yes, it's normal to want your will to be done and to have your prayers answered the way you want. Yet each of us must come to the place where we can give our lives over to God's care and plan. He is both the Author and the Finisher of life.

"He went away a second time and prayed, 'My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.'" (Matthew 26:42)

2. As an angel appeared and strengthened Jesus, we too should pray for God's supernatural encouragement to help us walk through our own "garden of Gethsemane." Praying for strength and help is not only what Jesus did, but it's what we should do as we encounter the overwhelming and agonizing emotions and pains that accompany the dying process.

"An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." (Luke 22:43)

3. It helps to have friends praying with you rather than "sleeping" or relating to you in superficial ways when you are facing death (like the disciples). Dying, as a Christian, should mean that the biblically functioning community (church) that you are a part of makes an intentional effort to

surround you and your family with prayer and comfort as you walk the final steps of your earthly journey before entering heaven.

“Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.’” (Matthew 26:45)

Do's and Don'ts

Here are a few “do's” and “don'ts” to consider when trying to help and encourage people who are in the process of dying, or for family members who have just experienced the death of a loved one.

- Don't avoid them. Talk to them. Let them know you are thinking about them. Let them know you love them and that you are praying for them. Be there!
 - Don't offer advice, pat answers, or theological opinions on why a loved one's death has happened. They need to be heard and loved. Just “being” with a person speaks volumes.
 - Do pray for them.
 - Do write them a note, call them on the phone, or visit them in person (but get their permission on the last one).
 - Don't be offended if they don't respond like you think they should. The grief stage varies from person to person.
 - If you have gone through a similar experience, share your personal story of how God helped you through (not what *they* should do, but what God has done for you) the death of your loved one.
 - Attend the funeral or memorial service for their loved one. Not only does God want us to do life together, He also wants us to experience “death” together by being there to support one another. Our presence alone brings encouragement.
4. When God's will (final outcome) is revealed about the dying process, don't fight it with last-ditch efforts that ultimately just postpone the inevitable. Jesus accepted God's decision about His death. His disciples did not. They were fighting all the way to the cross. Jesus refused to see

Himself as a victim of circumstances. Rather, He accepted His death with God's confidence.

“When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike with our swords?’ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, ‘No more of this!’” (Luke 22:49-51)

5. People are valuable to God. Continue to bless others around you as you travel on your road to heaven. Jesus still took time to heal a man's ear in the midst of the chaos and trauma surrounding His own death. I've personally been greatly impacted by people who have reached out to me in their final weeks and days of their lives here on earth. I treasure their stories and cherish the things they've taught me. I carry their words with me. Some of my greatest education about life has come through what others have taught me through their process of dying. God can do some of His best work in our final days as we reach out to those that God places in our paths.

“And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched the man's ear and healed him.” (Luke 22:50-51)

6. Focus on the eternal outcome and heavenly reward. Jesus focused His dying process on the other side of the grave. He saw past the bridge of death. His spirit and soul reached out toward the place where He would ultimately end up.

“Jesus answered, ‘But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.’” (Luke 22:68-69)

7. Jesus wept for the non-Christian who was far from God and who wouldn't go to heaven rather than crying for the one who had a relationship with God and would go to heaven. Jesus' eternal perspective colors His definition of reality.

“Jesus turned and said to them, ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.’” (Luke 23:28)

8. Even as we are surrounded by death, look for opportunities to lead others to the cross. As Jesus encountered His own death, He helped a non-Christian (the thief on the cross) find the reality of God (salvation through Christ). What a magnanimous heart of compassion and love for people!

“There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the Jews. One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’ But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:38-43)

9. Lavishly offer forgiveness. Jesus goes through the death process with no grudges. He forgave those who, many could say, had some responsibility in bringing about His circumstances. It is important for us to completely forgive family, God, our past, doctors, and ourselves when we go through the death process, too.

“When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.” (Luke 23:33-34)

10. Sometimes suffering is part of the dying process.

“About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matthew 27:46)

11. Grief is a normal and healthy emotion that needs to be expressed. Christians grieve like everyone else over death. The only difference is that we grieve with the hope of resurrection.

“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

12. God is ultimately in control of our lives. He is the great authority behind all circumstances that we face. Always seek to define God’s actions in the light of His character. Jesus refused to allow Pilate to intimidate Him into thinking that someone or something other than God was ultimately in control of His life, death, and destiny.

“Do you refuse to speak to me?” Pilate said. ‘Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?’ Jesus answered, ‘You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” (John 19:10-11)

13. It is important for the dying person to know that their loved ones will be taken care of. Even Jesus needed to know that His mother would be okay. He asked His best friend to look after her.

“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” (John 19: 25-27)

14. Death is not final. It is the preparation for the resurrection. Death never gets the last word. For the Christian, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ultimate triumph and victory over death. Because Jesus has risen from the dead, we will too.

“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15:51-57)

15. Christ-followers will be allowed to see Jesus face-to-face after leaving this physical world, and be welcomed and embraced into loving community and relationship with Him in paradise.

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”
(1 Corinthians 13:12)

“(The apostle Paul) I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:8)

Teach Me to Number My Days

My hope for us is that we will live with a spirit of gratitude and wisdom. There’s an old proverb that says that there is more wisdom at 1 funeral than at 10 parties. Moses, the Old Testament patriarch, said, “Oh Lord, teach me to number my days that my heart may be inclined unto wisdom.” (Psalm 90) When we understand the frailty of our humanity, when we comprehend the inevitable reality of our own death, and when we reflect on it from Christ’s perspective, and not from a human reaction rooted in fear, but in the grace and goodness of God, the psalmist tells us that this “coming to terms” with this eventual reality (our death) actually fosters wisdom in us (the ability to make right choices).

Death is the secret fear buried deep down inside every human being. As we honestly face the inevitability of our own death, and as we accept Jesus’ invitation to be Lord and Savior of both our life and death, we can get on with living life to the fullest and under the shadow of His truth and hope-filled perspective. No matter what season of life we find ourselves in, Jesus walks with us when we accept His invitation to be Lord of life and Lord over death. To choose life is to choose Jesus. His invitation is extended. His presence is available. His promise is sure. My prayer for us is that we will choose wisely.