

Ecclesiastes 7:1-4

Let's consider fears for a second. A brief look at a 2014 Washington Post<sup>1</sup> article reveals that America's top fears include public speaking, heights, bugs, snakes, needles and blood, clowns, zombies, flying, darkness, strangers, and ghosts. Now this is a pretty long and extensive list, but I would venture to say that if we continued to consider what it is that Americans and our brothers and sisters around the world fear, the list would most likely become even longer and more extensive. And I would continue to go out on a limb and suggest that perhaps among the many items on that list, the fear of death would be mingled in there, either directly or through some other slightly hidden means. Fear can be a powerful thing in many different forms, but for today, let's consider the fear of death and what this means for our lives now and in the future.

Death is a scary thing, I get that. It makes us uncomfortable and frankly, we don't really want to have to face it or the idea of it. But this bubble of fear and apprehension has to be popped. It really doesn't do us any good to fear death or the different issues that surround death. And as our Bible passage for today says in many ways, it might actually be more helpful for us to think about and talk about death. So, let's do just that. Let's take some time now, to talk about the one thing that our

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ingraham, "America's Top Fears: Public Speaking, Heights and Bugs," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2014, sec. Wonkblog, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/10/30/clowns-are-twice-as-scary-to-democrats-as-they-are-to-republicans/>.

society proclaims should go unnamed. Let's talk about death and what exactly it is that makes it so scary.

I was recently reading an article by a terminally ill woman and she identifies four things that she believes make us uncomfortable with death and dying<sup>2</sup>. She says that dying itself, the idea of what lies beyond death, the life we leave un-lived, and those we leave behind all lead to our anxiety around death. These are scary and uncomfortable things to think about. Surrounding these topics can be a lot of unknown things and mystery. Sometimes we don't understand what is happening to our or our loved one's bodies as they journey toward death. Sometimes we aren't sure of what comes after we die, even if we do have a strong faith life, this is still a question many of us ask. Sometimes it saddens us to think about the rain storms we'll never hear on our roofs or the laughs that we'll never get to share with those around us. Sometimes it angers us to know that we will leave people in this life that loved us but will never get to interact with us again. These things are sad and terrifying and it pains us to think about and discuss them. But I think it pains us and harms us even more to leave them undiscussed and hidden away.

It's important for us to realize that there is no way around death. As much as we don't want to admit it and say it to

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<sup>2</sup> Mackenzie Rockcastle, "Deconstructing Death as a Dying Woman. | Elephant Journal," accessed July 8, 2017, <https://www.elephantjournal.com/2017/06/deconstructing-death-as-a-dying-woman/>.

ourselves, we are, one day, going to die. Death and life go hand in hand. I think that there are two universal human experiences that we all face. Every human being on this planet will face two things, birth and death. Now these two things come in many different forms but no matter how we encounter them, we do. We talk joyously and sometimes endlessly about an anticipated birth but shrink away from an impending death. But what would happen if we changed our mind sets? What would happen if instead of avoiding death, we instead embraced it? What would happen if instead of attending party after party, we instead attended funerals and wakes, so to speak? How could our thinking and talking about death change the way that we live? We've probably all heard the idea of facing our fears, so what is it that holds us back from facing this one?

There are lots of reasons that I think we hesitate to talk about death and dying. But from what I've seen and my experience, I think one of those reasons is that we as a society have become so engrained to just not talk about it. We've been taught that death and dying are taboo ideas and concepts that we dare not speak about. Death and dying have become issues that we quietly contemplate on our own and don't dare breath a word to others about. We've sequestered death to the quiet, dark corners of hospitals and nursing homes. And while yes, for some, this is a helpful way to handle death and dying through quietly facing it at their own pace, for others, and perhaps most of us, it's an unhelpful way to think about it as we shy away and expect the staff of these places to handle what we can't or

don't want to. I think that in our own denying of death and dying, we're denying ourselves and our loved one's something.

Because in pushing death and dying to the backs of our minds, we deny that we ourselves have a limited time here on earth and in turn we perhaps tend to make ourselves immortal. We tend to focus on things that bring us momentary pleasure while denying how those things do and will affect those around us. We live in the moment and don't plan for the future. We make things unnecessarily hard in the end, when they really don't need to be. We go to extreme measures that might only prolong our lives for a few hours or maybe days. But what, dear friends, might we consider to happen if we embrace and think about death? Perhaps this thinking about death and dying now will prompt us to think about the quality and not the quantity of our lives. Perhaps in thinking about and talking about death, we will in turn find life. Maybe we'll be able to plan for what comes after us, therefore dispelling the fears of our lives unlived and those we leave behind. Perhaps by considering that someday we will die, we can find and focus on what really matters to us and live that now to the fullest.

I think too that by denying death and dying and pushing it to the backs of our minds, we deny one of the central events of our faith, the suffering and death of Christ on the cross. If we truly believe that Jesus is and was both fully human and fully God, then how can we deny death and dying? Jesus entered into our experience of being human through his death on the cross. Jesus, just like us experienced death. Jesus promised us

that there would not be a place that we go that we wouldn't go also. Dear brothers and sisters this includes death. I know that sometimes, I myself am guilty of thinking that there is this one place that God can't possibly reach us but oh how wrong is this idea. We hear over and over again and we see it in the message of the cross that death is defeated and need not be feared. We don't need to be afraid of what comes when we move toward death because Jesus promises us that he has already been there and will walk with us through that. When we look at death and dying in light of the cross, it becomes less scary because we know the promises that Christ gives us.

Death is a scary and uncomfortable thing for us to talk about. But does it have to be, is this really the end of the story? I don't think that it needs to be. Fear can have a powerful hold over us but it can be overcome. If we open ourselves up to talking about death and dying, we can overcome this fear. And if we work to remember the promises that Jesus offers us in his own dying and death, overcoming this fear will become all the more capable.