

Introduction

I'd like to begin with something that the celebrated astronomer, Carl Sagan, believed. In 1994, Sagan was diagnosed with a blood disease similar to leukemia. Several months before he died, he authored an article for Parade Magazine, in which he wrote this: **"I would love to believe that when I die I will live again – that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue. But as much as I want to believe that, I know of nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking."** That's what Sagan believed. We die and cease to exist. But he was wrong wasn't he? It's ironic. One the most brilliant men of the 20th century failed to grasp the most significant truth of human existence. We can have victory in Jesus and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

Vanity in Death

Let's begin with our Old Testament text, Ecclesiastes 2:12-17. Solomon identifies two kinds of people in it: the foolish and the wise. Let me ask you a question in that regard. Is it better to be foolish or wise? All of us would answer **"wise"** and so does Solomon. He declares in verse 13, **"Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness."** It's far better to be a King Solomon, in other words, than a Larry, Curly, or Moe.

Or is it? That's the hard headed question Solomon impliedly asks here. Does it truly matter if we're foolish or wise? He answers quite bluntly in verse 15 that **"No"** it doesn't matter.

He explains why it doesn't in verses 14 and 16. It's because the foolish and the wise have the same ultimate fate. They'll die and rot in the grave, after which they and everything about them will eventually be forgotten. But it isn't just the foolish and the wise. According to 9:2, it's the righteous and the wicked and the spiritual and the secular as well. As different as they are, their ultimate fate is the same.

An example is worth than a thousand words. An attorney named

David – a humble devoted follower of Jesus from whom goodness exudes. An attorney named Richard – a self-absorbed secularist from whom vanity and vulgarity exude. A hundred years from now, David and any memory of him will be gone on earth. A hundred years from now, Richard and any memory of him will be gone on earth. The moral is clear. Death is the great leveler. It doesn't matter who people are or how they live. Death tramples our value judgments by obliterating them all.

That's Solomon's belief and what it implies is profound. Human life on earth is "**vain**" (verse 15) and "**futility and striving after wind**" (verse 17). It's meaningless and absurd in other words. Death robs every person of his or her dignity and every project of its point. Since everyone's fate is the same, there's no reason to be concerned about what we are or how we live our lives. If that's true, as Solomon says it is, then there is only vanity in death. Death is the ugliest fact, the most terrible truth, of our existence.

Repressing Death

Most people regard it just that way and their dying dramatically impacts their living because they do. It makes them, as Solomon expresses it in verse 17, "**hate life.**" Those words, "**hate life,**" bring to mind the father of modern psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. What he believed and taught captures the gist of them. So, let me briefly explain to you what that was.

Freud contended that human beings are oriented toward death. It's the ultimate fact of life and they become aware of it in the early stages of development. As children, they recognize that there's a decaying side to their human nature and that they're moving toward death. This consciousness of death is horrifying; so much so that not dealt with, it would make people's lives intolerable and them insane as a result.

But most people aren't insane and Freud explained why. They propagate a denial of death. They believe what they have to believe and do what they have to do to make it seem unreal. They survive, in other

words, by repressing their consciousness of death. Freud was right. People repress their consciousness of death - in four primary ways.

Some repress it through illusions of grandeur. They get stuck on themselves and think they're God's gift to man. By getting caught up in their own importance, they're able to forget they're going to die. This is common, especially among teenagers.

Another way that people repress their consciousness of death is by identifying with some special person. It might be a political leader, actor, athlete, counselor, teacher, televangelist, or anyone who appears to be above the limitations and shortcomings of humanity. People lose themselves in this special person. They transfer their selfhood to him or her. That in turn gives them a sense of significance and power they wouldn't otherwise feel. They're then able, as a result of that, to escape their awareness of death. That explains the exaggerated outpouring of grief when people like John Kennedy and Princess Diana die. It reminds those who identify with them that they too will do the same.

People also repress their consciousness of death by embracing life. They surrender themselves to the lusts of the flesh. They immerse themselves in the ecstasies of sensuality. That's one of the reasons that husbands and even wives have mid-life flings. The excitement and pleasure they give make their deaths seem distant and even unreal.

There's a final primary way people repress their consciousness of death. They make the trivial ultimate. In their thinking and acting, they transform insignificant matters into major concerns. Doing that preoccupies them and diverts their attention from what is actually ultimate - death. Just look at some of the issues that people fight about and break up over. Or consider the inexplicable popularity of reality TV, much of which exaggerate inconsequential issues into matters of dramatic conflict, tension, and concern. People routinely make big deals out of nothing to cover up the fact of their deaths.

Those then are the primary defense mechanisms people use to escape the vanity of death. The problem is that they're only temporary.

They eventually break down. And when they do, people find themselves face to face with the ugliest fact of life – death.

Victory In Jesus

That's what death is to most people. But according to 2 Timothy 1:10, it doesn't have to be. We can have victory in Jesus instead.

Jesus experienced the one fate of which Solomon writes by dying on the cross for our sins. But He didn't stay dead. He began living again on the third day, and will continue to live forever.

That's what Jesus did and Paul reveals its staggering consequence in verse 10. It "**abolished death**" for those of us who follow Him. It eliminated it as a reality in their lives. Or as Jesus said it in John 11:26, we will "**never die.**" Our consciousness and activity will never cease – not even for a nanosecond. They'll continue instead after we take our last breath on earth. But they'll not only continue, they'll increase, dramatically, as well. Paul explains it this way in 1 Corinthians 13:12. We're thinking and acting only dimly or partially now. But after our last breath on earth, we'll be thinking and acting fully. We'll see things for the first time as they really are and be able to act accordingly.

My deceased mother, a devoted follower of Jesus, was a person of average intelligence and limited education (eighth grade). She was also a person of limited experience, living in Van Wert her entire life and never once taking a vacation. In October, institutions will award Nobel Prizes in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, economics, and peace to some of the best minds and greatest achievers in our world. But I can tell you this. My mother, if she were here on earth in her current condition, would be amused by what those prizes are going to be awarded for. That's because her levels of thinking and achieving now dwarf those of the best minds and greatest achievers in our world.

That illustrates what Paul teaches in verse 10. Jesus abolished death. Consequently, we don't die after our last breath on earth. On the contrary, we become alive as never before.

Live in the Light of It

That's our victory in Jesus and the word "**light**" in verse 10 reveals our call. Live in light of it. Live in light of our victory in Jesus. That's our call and we answer it by doing three things.

First, we learn as many facts as we can about our life after life. By "**life after life**" I mean our eternal life after our earthly life.

A Christian once cited 1 Corinthians 2:9 to me and said; "**Paul says no one can conceive the things God has prepared for those who love Him. So, we can't know what our lives after death are going to be like.**" She echoes the sentiment of author John Hicks who draws the same conclusion, "**We know nothing concrete about the condition of our existence after death.**" But that's simply not so. Christians who cite verse 9 to make that point always fail to cite the next verse, "**For to us God revealed them through the Spirit.**" 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 teach us this. We can't know anything about life after life empirically, through our own reasoning and research, verse 9. But we can know a lot about it supernaturally, through God's revelation in Scripture, verse 10.

2 Timothy 1:10 makes that same point. Jesus "**brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.**" That means that the gospel, the New Testament, develops the undeveloped doctrine of life after life in the Old Testament. The New Testament, in other words, gives us a substantial amount of information about it.

So we learn that information. First, we gather the facts that the Bible reveals about life after life by reading it. I read Revelation 22:5, for instance, and gathered this fact. We will "**reign forever and ever.**" Second, we infer as many facts as we can from the facts we've gathered. Ask and answer a question, "**If this Biblical fact is so, what must also be so.**" So, I inferred other facts from the one fact, we will "**reign.**" We will exercise creative power and authority over the activity and ambience of heaven. We will shape the nature and history of heaven itself by the things we achieve and do.

That demonstrates the first thing we do to live in light of our victory

in Jesus. We learn as many facts as we can about life after life.

There's a second thing we do. Determine the practical implications of those facts to us. We ask and answer a question, "**What does this fact about my life after life mean, if anything, to my person and life now?**" I asked and answered that question about the fact that we will reign. It means that the best is yet to be. No matter how old we are or how badly things have gone on this earth, we have a bright and glorious future ahead of us. That illustrates the second thing we do to live in light of our victory in Jesus. Determine the practical implications of the facts we've learned about life after life to us.

We do a third thing. Think, feel, and act consistently with those implications. Perceive, interpret, experience, and engage things as if those implications are so. I once counseled a 60 year-old Christian businessman who had filed bankruptcy. Discouraged and upset he blurted out, "**I'm a 'has-been'.**" To which I replied, "**No, you aren't. You're a 'will-be' instead because you're going to reign with Jesus in heaven.**" I then explained to him what "**to reign**" means and urged him that he had every reason in reality to rejoice not despair. Remember the implications of the fact that we will reign. I knew those and interpreted his circumstances in a way that was consistent with them.

That then is our call. Live in light of our victory in Jesus. Become a disciple of His and then do three things: learn as many facts as we can about our life after life, determine the practical implications of those facts, and then think, feel, and act consistently with those implications.

Conclusion

I close with a little anecdote that clinches the message I've tried to preach. H.S. Laird's father, a devoted follower of Jesus, lay dying. His son, who was sitting next to his bed, asked, "**Dad, how do you feel?**" To which he replied: "**Son, I feel like a little boy on Christmas Eve.**" That is our victory in Jesus.