

INTRODUCTION

The title of the skit that you just saw and heard is *Ready or Not*. It alludes of course to what we say just before we go to find someone in Hide-and-Seek, "***Ready or not, here I come!***" The skit was about death and allow me to personify it in that regard. Do you know what death does? It eventually says to each of us "***Ready or not, here I come!***" and then finds us. So we had better get ready for it and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn in your Bibles to Philippians 1:21-26.

"HERE I COME"

I start with the words "die" in verse 21 and "depart" in verse 23. Paul is discussing death here. Going back to the personification of death and the words "***here I come,***" it is coming for each of us isn't it? We don't know when it's coming but we do know that it's coming. I read about a fun loving funeral director who always signed his correspondence, "***Eventually yours.***" That's true. Everyone will eventually be his. Think about those who fought in World War I, for instance. All of them, whether they were or weren't killed in action, are dead now. That shows us that war doesn't increase death; it only hastens it. Death is total in every generation, war or no war.

But let's make it more personal than that. A physician informed a patient of his that he had inoperable cancer. The physician bluntly told him, "***You're going to die.***" To which the patient calmly replied, "***You too, Doc.***" I often think that when I'm conducting funeral services. I look out on the mourners and think, "***You too.***" My point is that you and I will die. It is a mathematical certainty. One out of one people do. Unless we're alive when Jesus comes, our chances of dying are 100%.

"READY"

So, be ready for it. Going back to the personification of death again and the word "***ready***", that's our call. Be ready for it. Verse 23 shows

what that means. Paul says he has *"the desire to depart."* Some think that is the most dramatic statement in the Bible. The word *"hard-pressed"* makes it even more so. Grasp Paul's frame of mind and heart and he's not mentally ill. He's excited about the prospect of dying. It's something he eagerly anticipates. And you know what, we should too!

Tony Campolo tells one of the most poignant stories I've ever heard. A promising young Christian writer named Mel was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer and given six months to live. Totally dispirited and wallowing in self-pity, he decided to attend a class taught by the controversial Daniel Berrigan. Berrigan could tell that something was bothering Mel and rudely asked him in front of the class, *"What's wrong with you?"* Mel felt like telling him to mind his own business but answered instead, *"I'm dying of cancer."* Without hesitation or sympathy of any kind, Berrigan quickly replied, *"That must be very exciting."* Mel was taken back at first but the more he thought about it, the more he realized he was right. It was exciting or at least should be.

That's food for thought isn't it? How many of you have ever known a person who was actually excited about dying. I've ministered to scores of terminally ill people and have known some who weren't afraid of dying. But I've never known one who was actually excited about dying like Paul was; who eagerly anticipated it like he did. I've found in fact that almost everyone, including Christians, think that's impossible.

But it isn't. On the contrary, it's possible for us all. We need to understand that Paul was not some kind of special humanity, different in his essence than we are. He himself declared in Acts 14:15 that he was a man *"of the same nature as you."* If Paul was excited about dying, then we, as disciples of Jesus, can be too. We can anticipate our death just as eagerly as he did his. We can experience what he experienced.

"OR NOT"

But not automatically of course! We can experience what Paul experienced but only if we do what Paul did – get ready for death.

Sadly, most people don't. Thinking about the personification of death and the words "*or not*", we recognize something. Most people don't get ready for death. They cover it up instead. Sigmund Freud was right when he argued that people's ultimate sickness is their soul's angst or fear of death. He was also right when he said that many people deal with that angst by covering death up in a variety of ways.

Hero worship, as an example, is one of those. What people do is seek out a person or persons who convey an impression of immortality. They then identify themselves with and lose themselves in those persons. They transfer their selfhood to their hero or heroine and gain a sense of participation in their seeming immortality. That explains why so many Americans are so preoccupied with movie stars, athletes, and celebrities.

People's extreme overreaction to Princess Diana's death is a case in point. They found in her vitality, beauty and wealth a quality of transcendence in which they themselves shared. But they lost it when she died. That explains the phenomenal outpouring of emotion that her death generated. People who don't cry wept openly and publicly. Her death was more than just her death. It was theirs as well. And when they cried for her, they cried for themselves as well.

Hero worship is just one of the many ways that people cover up death. Others include bickering, seeking extreme experiences, embracing life, mental illness, heroism, and more.

It's true then. Most people aren't getting ready for their death. They spend their entire life covering it up instead.

But let's not be like most people. Let's be like the Apostle Paul instead and get ready for our death by doing what he did – two things.

THINK RIGHTLY

First, think rightly about the worlds we're leaving and entering.

Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote Philippians and knows that he might be executed. So he thinks about the world that he'd be leaving if he was and says, in verses 24 and 25, that he desires to stay.

Note the reason though. It isn't because it's better than the world he'd be entering but because he'd be able to keep working for Jesus if he did.

Now, most dying people that I've ministered to desired to stay in this world just like Paul did – but for a different reason. It's because they could hardly stand the thought of their beautiful world going on without them. They deeply regretted the good things in it that they were going to miss. Here are some of those good things, that dying people have told me that they're going to miss: my daughter's wedding and walking her down the aisle, my grandsons graduating from high school, growing old with my spouse, retirement, the Browns winning a Super Bowl, and more. They wanted to stay alive to experience those things.

I don't want to be insensitive but that's thinking wrongly. It isn't realistic. Perhaps an analogy will help. Suppose you plan on going to one of those Catholic Church carnivals next Saturday. But on Monday morning, your boss tells you that he's giving you the next week off, in addition to your vacation, and sending your family and you, all expenses paid, to Disney World – as a bonus. But the rest of the week, before you leave on Saturday, instead of being excited about going to Disney World, you deeply regret that you're going to miss the carnival as a result. Would a right thinking person do that? Of course not!

The analogy is an imperfect one, I admit, but it's the same way with a right thinking dying person. He or she wouldn't regret missing the good things in the world they're leaving. Why? It's because the world that they're entering is so much better. That's Paul's very point in verse 21 and 23. He explains why he's excited about dying. It's because death *"is gain"*, verse 21, and *"very much better"*, verse 23. He knows and focuses on a simple fact. The world that he's entering is far, far, far, far, far, far, far, far, far, far better than the one he's leaving.

Unfortunately, most Christians don't understand that. They believe that it's better but don't understand how it is. Author John Hicks, for instance, writes, *"We know nothing concrete about the condition of our existence after death."* Most dying Christians concur with that,

which means they don't understand the world they're entering.

That's problematic though because when we believe what we don't understand, we suffer. I see that all the time with dying disciples of Jesus. They believe in the eternal life they're about to enter, but don't understand it. They then suffer because they don't. They're intimidated not excited about the world they're entering.

If you and I want to be excited about dying, we absolutely positively must understand the world that we're entering when we do. And the good news is that we can. John Hicks is wrong. The fact is the Bible reveals a great deal about the condition of our existence after death. So learn what it reveals. You can do that in one of two ways. Study the Bible thoroughly yourself in that regard. Or come to a Sunday school class I'm teaching, beginning September 9. It's titled *Life after Life* and examines in detail what the world that we're entering is like.

So that's the first thing that we have to do to get ready for death. Think rightly - about the worlds that we're leaving and entering.

LIVE RIGHTLY

The second thing that we have to do is to live rightly. Look at four of the most powerful words in the Bible in Philippians 1:21, "*to live is Christ.*" Hear that again and I'll alter it a bit. To live is Jesus.

Let me say right off the bat that those words express a rigorous way of life. Our biggest mistake is interpreting them in light of decent Christians today, including pastors. The truth is that decent Christians, including pastors, don't live the kind of life that they suggest.

I'd explain that kind of life in terms of integration. The word "integrate" means "to bring into." That integration has to do with Jesus and us. There are two options open to us in that regard. The first is to integrate Him, bring Him, into our life. We make Him fit into what we're willing and doing. The second option is to integrate us, bring us, into His life. We make us fit into what He's willing and doing. In the first option, we have dominion over Him. In the second, He has dominion over

us. "To live is Jesus" refers to the second option.

What that means as a practical matter is this. We will and do everything in everyday life *like* Him and *for* Him. I've purposely chosen those prepositions and they're the key to understanding this. We will and do everything in our every day life *like* Him and *for* Him.

I explained the past two weeks what it means to do everything *like* Him. We do it as He would if He were us. Thus, we watch television and use sports as He would if He were us. Now let me explain what it means to do everything *for* Him. We do it in order to please and delight Him and in a way that it will. That's it. We're so "into Him" that we do everything in order to please and delight Him and in a way that it will.

I read a curious fact about some medieval artisans. Almost all wood carvers carve only the front side of their works because the backside is against the wall and no one sees it. But some medieval ones also carved the backside as well because someone does see it, Jesus. Taking the time and effort to do that showed something about them. They intended to please and delight people with their works - but only second of all. It was Jesus whom they intended to please and delight first of all.

That illustrates what it means to do everything *for* Jesus. We do it in order to please and delight Him and in a way that it will.

You now know the second thing that we have to do to get ready for death. We have to live rightly. We have to integrate our life into His. We have to will and do literally everything *like* and *for* Him.

CONCLUSION

I close this morning with a profound personal question that all of us, including me, need to ask and answer. Am I ready to die? Suppose that an angel appeared to you and told you that you were going to die in seven days of a brain aneurysm, which is a pretty painless way to go. What would you feel? Excitement or dread? What would you do? Rejoice or panic? My prayer is that you're so ready to die that you'd be excited and rejoice. Think and live rightly and you will be!