

## ***“kNOw Fear; Facing Life’s Phobias—The Fear of Death”***

Today we wrap up this message series called “kNOw Fear; Facing Life’s Phobias.” We’ve talked about the fear of the future, fear of commitment, fear of failure, fear of loneliness and the fear of God. Today we’re going to talk about one of top fears of most people, and that is the fear of death.

This past week I visited an interesting web site, [www.deathclock.com](http://www.deathclock.com). All you have to do is type in your date of birth, mine is July 24, 1966, your outlook on life (are you pessimistic, optimistic, sadistic, or normal), put in your Body Mass Index, whether or not you’re a smoker, and it will give you your estimated date of expiration. You will see on the screen that mine is Thursday, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2063, and I have got about 1.7 billion seconds remaining. It says that it is the Internet’s friendly reminder that your life is slipping away. As for me, I want to die in my sleep like my grandfather...not screaming in terror like the passengers in his car. Just kidding!!

Every time I talk about death, it makes people nervous. We don’t really like to discuss it. We call it anything but death. We say, “Their candle has gone out.” “They passed away.” “They left us.” “They are pushing daisies.” Anything but death because we fear it. If you think about it, this fear fuels a lot of the health movement. We pay plastic surgeons huge amounts of money for lifts and liposuctions, for tucks and transplants. We gorge ourselves on vitamins and eat organically. We treadmill and triathlon and pump iron. We are trying to beat the clock. We are trying to beat the odds. We are trying to escape this death date, this expiration date.

But like George Bernard Shaw wrote, “The stats on death are quite impressive. One out of one dies.” He’s right, but we do not have to fear that death. And living life in such a way that we don’t fear death has a lot to do with decisions we make.

In order to address our fear of death I want to talk about some common questions we have about death to get a better, biblical picture of what it’s all about. Getting our heads around a few things can truly help us face our fears.

First, what happens right after we die? What is the agenda? The first thing on the agenda is that there is a resurrection. Acts 24:15, **“There will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” (Acts 24:15, NIV)**. We will be resurrected. When our candle goes out in this life, it will be ignited in the next life, and we will be our true selves, a soul resurrection, our identities will be intact.

Now, some Christians believe that when you die your soul will sleep until Jesus returns and there are scriptures that point to that. But I think that the larger witness of scripture points toward the belief that when we die we immediately wake up face to face with Jesus.

There are several scriptures that point to this, one of the most important passages is when Jesus is hanging on the cross between two criminals. One criminal is cursing Jesus, but the other one believes in him and says, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus turns to that man and says, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” He doesn’t say, “Today you’ll go to sleep and when I return at some point in the future, you’ll be with me.” He says, “Today.” This tells me that that man was going to be with Jesus that very day. So looking at the larger witness of scripture I don’t think we fall asleep when we die and wait for the second coming of Jesus, I think we enter the presence of the Lord immediately.

So there we are, our death clock has run out, we’re standing face to face with God. Then what happens? The Bible says in the book of Hebrews, Chapter 9, Verse 27, **“...it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment.” (Hebrews 9:27, NRSV)**. To face judgment. The question is, “What’s the deciding factor on this judgment thing?” What’s the deciding factor at this cosmic appointment that we will all have with God? Right here is one the biggest points of spiritual confusion in the universe. Because word on the street is that God, being so gracious, so loving, will kind of wink at those of us who are basically good people and say, “Come on into heaven. You weren’t perfect, but you tried to be good. Welcome to eternity.”

And the word on the street goes, “If you are Saddam Hussein or Ben Laden, a child molester or a serial killer, watch out. You are in the deep weeds. But if you are a good person, if you keep your nose clean, and pay your taxes, and throw some money to the church and United Way, and coach Little League Soccer, hey a good God is going to let you into heaven.” That’s the word on the street and that makes us feel good.

But the word on the street isn't accurate. Whether I am a good guy or whether you are a good girl, whether we have paid our taxes, kept our noses clean, whether we have coached Little League Soccer will not even be brought to the table at this meeting with God. It can't even be entered into the agenda. But, "I'm Catholic; I was confirmed." "I was baptized in the Baptist Church." "I am in a small group." "I am a greeter." "I went on a mission trip." That's great! That is awesome! Good for you! But it will not be entered into this cosmic meeting with God.

Our culture of "I'm OK, You're OK" has duped a lot of us into thinking that God grades on the performance plan, or that God grades on some national average, some cosmic curve. No. No. God's standard that we're measured up against is simply his holiness. His holiness. And all of us are sin-stained in comparison to the holiness of God. I am and you are. We are in severe trouble.

So God is going to look for one thing and one thing only in this meeting. He is going to see if we have sealed the deal with his Son. He is going to look at your life and mine and see if a cosmic transaction has taken place. He is going to look and see if we have received what his Son did for us on the cross. That's it. Here's one of the key teachings of the Bible, **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV)**. We become a Christian by grace through faith, nothing we deserve, nothing we merit. It is by God's unfathomable love. And the book of Ephesians, Chapter 1, explains the process of how someone makes this transaction and what occurs. **"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance..." (Eph 1:13-14, NIV)**.

In other words, you hear the word of truth and you claim that truth for yourself, you own that good news, you choose to accept what Jesus did. And when you accept what Jesus did you are marked with a seal that identifies you as God's own. That seal means the transaction is complete. That seal means that you don't have to be afraid of that appointment with God. That seal means that all of your sinfulness, guilt, shame and pain are transferred to Jesus' shoulders. And all his forgiveness, love, righteousness, and grace are transferred to your shoulders. That's the cosmic transaction. And that's the only thing God's going to be looking for on that day when you have your face to face.

I do more and more shopping on line. Birthday gifts, Christmas gifts, electronics, house wares. It's gotten easier to do over the years. And whenever I make a purchase I look for that final phrase, "Transaction Complete." Then I know it's done. The cost has been paid, and the product is on its way.

What does the computer screen of your soul have on it? Transaction complete or incomplete? When we make the truth of God our own, we're sealed. Transaction complete. We're sealed. We're sealed. And this is a transaction that needs to take place before the death clock of your life runs out. This meeting will only be about one thing: has the transaction been completed in your life or not?

Let's talk about the third thing that happens after we die: the separation. The Bible describes how Jesus will separate all of us into one of two camps. **"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them from one another as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:32, NIV)**. Jesus will separate us in the post-mortem meeting. We either face post-mortem eternal bliss in heaven or post-mortem eternal punishment in hell.

Let's talk about heaven. Heaven is going to be a place that we cannot even fathom, it is so awesome. For example, take the closest you have ever felt to God. I mean the closest. It could have been in one of the church services here. It could have been in a small group situation. It could have been in a Bible Study. It could have been walking on a beach or in the woods. Just take that and multiply that exponentially, and it will still fall miserably short of the glory and the connection we will have with God in heaven.

Now, take the best you have ever felt relationally, the best, the closest you have ever felt with another human being. Multiply that exponentially, and that will fall miserably short of what heaven is going to be like.

Now, take into consideration your skill set. Think about the time you were really on a roll using your abilities, and it falls exponentially, miserably short of how you are going to use your skill set in heaven. Heaven is also going to be a place, the Bible says, where we have a body transformation, and some of us are looking forward to that.

All this stuff you see in the movies and on television about the little angels flying around with little wings and little trumpets, that is not heaven! That is not it. It is going to be a place like no other place, a place of unencumbered worship, unencumbered relationships, unencumbered skill development. No racism, no backbiting, no wars, no rumor of wars. Heaven. And some of us will go to heaven.

Others of us, I don't like saying this but I have to, will go to a place called hell. *US News & World Report* in their January 31, 2000, edition did a survey on hell, and they asked this question: "Do you think there is a hell?" 64% said "yes," 25% said "no," and 9% said they don't know. More people believe in hell today than they did in the 1950s or than they did ten years ago.

The Bible uses several phrases to describe this place. The first phrase we will talk about right quick is "outer darkness." Every once in a while I hear people who say, "You know, I don't think I want to go to heaven with all those goody-goody Christians. I want to go to hell so I can raise hell with my friends. We can party in hell." Even if your friends are in hell, you won't know it. It's solitary confinement. Complete isolation. Outer darkness.

The Bible also calls hell a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, that means a place of utter remorse and regret. It will be a place where you say, "Oh no, I had the chance to commit to Christ; to accept his free gift. I knew the spirit was tugging on me. I knew he was pulling on me through this relationship, through this group, through this church, but I did the pushback." Hell will be that place of absolute regret, weeping, brokenness.

Another phrase the Bible used concerning hell is "where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched." Fourth century theologian Jerome said, "Hell is a place of sensory torment." It is the forever painful feeling of isolation and separation from God.

The question I get all the time is, "But, Aaron, how could this good God send good people to hell? How can God slam-dunk this nice family member into eternal damnation? I just don't get it. Aaron, my God would never do such a thing." Listen carefully, God doesn't slam-dunk anybody into hell. God doesn't send anybody to hell! We make that choice. We are made in the image of God. We have a freedom to decide.

Here is what God will do at the end of our existence. He will simply give us in eternity a greater measure of what we desired on this planet. If we opened our lives to Christ, if we followed him, then at the end of our life when we have this meeting with God, God will say, "You know what, the transaction was complete and I will give you in greater measure what you went after on this planet. Heaven is for you."

Conversely, those who did the pushback, and I'm talking about the good guys and the good girls, those who turned their backs on God's leadings, on God's church, on the Bible, on Christian people inviting them to worship and talking to them about Christ, God will have another statement. "You never did the transaction. You heard my truth. I loved you. I sought you. I bought you. I whispered to you. I elbowed you. I went after you, but you dissed me. You pushed back from me. You did the pushback. You kept your distance from me on earth, you will have a greater measure of this in eternity."

We make the choice. And God desperately, deeply, longingly wants us to choose him and his way. He wants us more than anything to choose life! God is not making it hard to spend eternity with him, he's making it so easy! But God will not make us choose.

I had a very interesting discussion Sunday night down at the Salvage Yard. One of our leaders down there had a great question that was essentially, "Aaron if a person accepts the gift that Christ offers, but then lives a life that is far from God, sleeping around, stealing at the office, do they really still get into heaven? Where's the cut-off point? At what point have you blown it so bad that you've pushed Christ out of your life?"

I've thought a lot about this and there are some key things to understand. First, God wants people to get into heaven. He's not trying to keep people out, he wants people in. That's why God created us, to be in communion with him. That's why Jesus came, to bridge the gap.

Second, all of us have sinned and fallen short. No matter how good we think we are, we still fall short. If we've invited Jesus into our lives, we're still going to fall short and blow it, and we're taught in scripture that God's grace is sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9). We're taught that love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). But, but if we live in ways that are contrary to God's way, over time, eventually we'll be so far from him that we push him out, we stop looking to him, we stop looking for him, we start hiding from him. That's when some of Jesus'

harshest words will kick in, will ring in our ears, "Many will say to me on the last day, 'Lord, I did this. Lord, I did that. Lord, I was in the church. Lord. Lord.'" But he will say, "Depart from me, I never knew you."

Jesus said, "I will know my followers by the fruit they produce." Am I asking you to doubt whether or not you are a Christ follower? No. But I am asking you to take inventory. It is not a deal where you say, "Oh, I've got a ticket to heaven. I've prayed the prayer. I can just get wasted all the time, have sex with this person and that person. It doesn't matter because God and I are tight. I prayed the prayer a long time ago." If there has been no life change, if there has been no discipleship, if there has been no growth, if there's no difference in how we speak, in how we treat others, in how we use our time, talents and treasures, it's got to make you think, "Did I really invite Christ in, or was I just trying to buy some fire insurance?" I am not the judge, God is. But I do know this: you are not ready to live until you are ready, really ready, to die.

Non-Christians look at death and are afraid of it. "Let's put it off as long as possible. Maybe I'll cryogenically freeze my body, or maybe just my head if I can't afford to do the whole thing, so I can be awaked at some later, better, time to live more days on this earth." I say, "You've got to be kidding me!" As wonderful as life is here at its best, if they unfreeze you, you're still going die! You're still going to get sick. You're still going to face the death of others. You're still going to have to pay taxes! So many people try to postpone death, but you know what? Christians see death differently! We see death as the final victory, not the final defeat! Death is the moment we receive everything we've been longing for on this side of eternity. Paul wrote these powerful words, "**Death has been swallowed up in victory.**" "**Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?**" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55, NIV).

Do I want to die soon? No! I want to stick around with my family as long as possible! I want to stick around with you! But you know what? I'm not afraid of dying. I'm anxious because I've not been there yet, I'm anxious because of the pain and suffering I may experience before I die. But I know at my death, I enter into a fullness of life that I can't really begin to get my brain around. Our perspective on death is very different when we're followers of Jesus Christ because of the resurrection of the body.

What does your screen say? Transaction complete? Look back at the web site. I have already burned up 1,500 seconds. I hope that this message has been a friendly reminder that your life is slipping away. Has the deal been done? Have you made the call? Because, remember, you are not ready to live until you are ready to die.

And we as Christ-followers believe that death has been swallowed up in victory by the resurrection of Jesus from the grave and we are people who have hope.

This whole series has been about fear. And the bottom line has always been what God has been trying to communicate to humanity since day one. Come follow me and do not be afraid. And for today that is the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer...

Listen to this song, it's called "Fly to Jesus."

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