

# **SERMON for the MEMORIAL SERVICE of MICHIAH LANCASTER**

**at St. Thomas's Church, Rondebosch, Cape Town, 18 January 2018**

We have gathered in honour and memory of American Missionary Volunteer, Michiah Lancaster.

*“Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Romans 8:37-39

## **Tragedy at Newlands Dam**

At 3:16pm on Sunday, 14 January 2018, American Missionary volunteer, Michiah Lancaster, drowned in Newlands Dam, Cape Town, South Africa.

## **Missionary Vision**

21-year-old Michiah was in the country with his younger brother Isaac (19-years-old), for the three-week Great Commission Course, after which they plan to travel through to Mozambique, to serve at a Mission there.

## **Sweltering Heat**

It was a sweltering hot day and after ministering at a church in Bellville South in the morning, Michiah, his brother Isaac and some other participants of the intensive Great Commission Course took advantage of the only free time of the packed programme of the week to head off to Newlands Dam for a swim.

## **Severe Water Restrictions**

The level 6 water restrictions imposed by the City of Cape Town municipal authorities has effectively closed swimming pools as it is illegal to top-up one's pool water levels. Therefore the swimming pool that would on other occasions have been available at the Mission, was depleted and the local municipal swimming pool at Newlands was closed. Along with many hundreds of other Capetonians, they went for a swim in Newlands Dam. This dam is primarily for the South African National Parks Forestry Department Wild Fire Services, for their helicopters to refill their large canvass fire buckets slung under the helicopters for containing forest fires.

## **Michiah Struggles in Deep Waters**

The dam is 8 meters (28 feet) deep. Shortly after arrival at the dam, Michiah swam out into the middle of the dam and was then observed to be struggling by Kyle, one of the GCC participants. Kyle immediately swam over and sought to help him, pulling him up as he had gone under the water. Michiah was not saying anything and it appeared that he had swallowed water. Kyle called for help and immediately, Christopher, Calvin and other GCC participants swam over to assist, but by the time they reached the middle of the dam, Michiah had disappeared beneath the surface.

## **Desperate Attempts to Rescue Michiah**

For the next hour, Calvin frantically dived trying to find Michiah in the murky and deep waters. Other participants of the GCC on the bank phoned for help from local police, Fire and Rescue emergency services and to the Mission.

## **Congestion and Confusion**

As soon as I heard of the crisis, I raced over with my daughter Daniela and was astounded by the vast amount of traffic and large crowds of people who were at Newlands Dam. They were being

evacuated as we were trying to arrive. The police had ordered everyone out of the water and away from the dam, so as to not impede their search and rescue efforts.

### **Rescue Efforts Mobilised**

The station commander of Rondebosch police station, Colonel Breedt, was on site and she informed me that since the closure of the Newlands swimming pool, many hundreds were coming to this dam, especially on very hot days, yet SAN Parks, whose jurisdiction the dam was, did not have any lifeguards on duty.

### **Frustrating Delays**

My son, Calvin and Brandon, another GCC participant, were still in the water, frustratingly urging police and EMS people on the banks to help. They were informed that procedure prevented them from entering the water. They had to wait for the divers' arrival. South African Police Service divers and Fire and Rescue divers were enroute battling traffic to get to the dam.

### **Deep and Dark**

As one Fire and Rescue EMS person said to me, if this was a clear swimming pool, such as at Newlands, they would plunge in, but this is an extremely deep and dark dam and their procedures required them to wait for the divers.

### **Double Loss**

When I found Isaac, Michiah's younger brother, he had just completed a phone call back to his parents in Missouri. Incredibly, Isaac told me that 9 years earlier, when he was 9 years old, his elder brother, Timothy, had drowned in America.

### **Intensive Prayer**

Several of the young women on our GCC were gathered on the banks praying intensely. Calvin was physically exhausted from his desperate attempts to continuously dive and find Michiah. Earlier in the day Calvin had run a 15km race in a very fast time.

### **Shock and Frustration**

By now Michiah had been beneath the surface for over an hour! Some of our girls expressed shock at callous and thoughtless comments made by bystanders. Kyle expressed great frustration that while he was struggling to keep Michiah afloat, strangers swimming nearby had just looked and done nothing. All of our GCC men had plunged in and swam with great urgency, but they could not reach him in time.

### **Systematic Underwater Search**

At approximately 5:20pm the South African Police Service Diving Unit and Fire and Rescue services had arrived on the scene and began a systematic search across the floor of the dam. By 6:40pm Michiah's body was recovered and brought to the surface.

### **Prayer and Gratitude**

We all prayed with Isaac and then both Isaac and I went and shook hands with each of the divers and rescue personnel involved in the operation to personally thank them for their efforts. We then prayed with some of these rescue people by the vehicles and by the body of Michiah and returned after 7pm to report the sad news to all those back at the Mission base.

### **Extraordinary Testimony**

At this point several testified of what Michiah had said at the Bellville South Church that very Sunday morning: Michiah had testified that when he was 12 years old, his elder brother, 17-year-old Timothy, had drowned. This brought Michiah to surrender his life to Christ and he read Romans 8:28-30. ***“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be***

***conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.***

### **Faithful Witness**

Everyone on the Course testified of Michiah's extraordinary faith, joy, humility, servant-heart and what a blessing he had been to us all. I recalled the testimony of Faithful, in *Pilgrims Progress*, who after dying in the Lord was seen taken up by chariots of fire, direct to the Celestial City, while Christian continued on the narrow way, rejoicing in Faithful's life, witness and steadfastness, being faithful unto death.

### **Much Fruit**

When later on that evening, I spoke with Michiah's parents, Paul and Tressa Lancaster and some of their other children, they shared John 12:24 ***"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."*** Our Lord in His Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13, reminded us that the Lord sows His sons into the world to bear good fruit.

### **Parables of the Sower**

Most people know the first Parable of the Sower, Matthew 13:18-23, where we are the sower, the Word of God is the seed and the field is the hearts of people. However, there is a second Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:24-43). In the second parable of the Sower, God is the sower, the sons and daughters of the Kingdom are the seed and the field is the World. We must put down roots where God plants us and we must bear fruit. ***"He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the Kingdom..."*** Matthew 13:37-38

### **Life Purpose**

On Michiah's Application Form under his Life Purpose, he wrote: *"Using every life's breath for the glory of God. Our life is short. So we must do all that we can for His glory and nothing else."* ***"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints."*** Psalm 116:15

### **To Glorify God and Worship Him Forever**

In answer to the question: What is God's ultimate call in your life? Michiah answered: *"Giving Him glory! The fear of the Lord has called me to be a missionary. I am daily waiting on Him and seeking to do all that I can for His glory."* Previously, Michiah has been involved in missions to Mexico and Mozambique.

### **Mission to Africa Must Continue**

Michiah's parents, Paul and Tressa Lancaster, made clear to me that they want their son's body to be buried in Africa and they do not want their younger son, Isaac, to cut short his mission to Africa. They want him to complete the Great Commission Course, which he is eager to do and to continue on to complete the planned mission to Mozambique. ***"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."*** Philippians 1:21

### **We Do Not Mourn as Those who Have No Hope**

Of course, this has been a traumatic experience for all of us in the Mission and for all the participants of the Great Commission Course. However, the calm and confident faith of Isaac and his family has set the tone and no one has sought to cut short their time of missions training and outreaches with the Great Commission Course. Isaac is determined to complete the Course and his Mission to Mozambique and our team has been bonded together with even greater intensity. Monday, 15 January, we climbed to the top of Lions Head and held a time of prayer and hymn singing, praising God for the life of Michiah and praying for many to be brought to Salvation in Christ as a result of his testimony.

## Resurrection of the Body

We are all the better, and stronger, for having known Michiah. We grieve because we have lost a brother and friend and because it may be a long time until we see him again. But we also rejoice in the blessed hope of the resurrection of the body at the Day when our Lord, Christ Jesus returns to Judge the world. Death for the Christian is not fatal, nor is it final. Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life.

## Thanks Be to God Who Gives Us the Victory

On Sunday night, we read 1 Corinthians 15:12-58. The concluding verses give us our marching orders: ***"...Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the Law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."*** 1 Corinthians 15:54-58.

**A CHILD of MINE** - A poem first published in a newspaper circa 1930.

I will lend you, for a little time, a child of mine, He said.  
For you to love the while he lives, and mourn for when he's dead.  
It may be six or seven years, or twenty-two or three.  
But will you, till I call him back, take care of him for Me?  
He'll bring his charms to gladden you, and should his stay be brief.  
You'll have his lovely memories, as solace for your grief.

I cannot promise he will stay, since all from earth return.  
But there are lessons taught down there, I want this child to learn.  
I've looked the wide world over, in search for teachers true.  
And from the throngs that crowd life's lanes, I have selected you.  
Now will you give him all your love, nor think the labour vain.  
Nor hate me when I come to take him home again?

I fancied that I heard them say, 'Dear Lord, Thy will be done!  
For all the joys Thy child shall bring, the risk of grief we'll run.  
We'll shelter him with tenderness, we'll love him while we may,  
And for the happiness we've known, forever grateful stay.  
But should the angels call for him, much sooner than we've planned.  
We'll brave the bitter grief that comes, and try to understand.

## Living in the Light of Eternity

***"It is appointed unto man once to die and after that the Judgment."*** Hebrews 9:27

## Be a Fisher of Men

*"Jesus Christ once said to professional fishermen, 'Follow Me, I will make you a fisher of men.'"*  
***"Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever."*** Daniel 12:3

## The Victory of Christ

Many religions believe there is an after-life. But what is unique to Christianity is the distinctive belief in the resurrection of the body. Christ's Resurrection guarantees that those who die believing in Him shall one Day be raised in His likeness to be with Him forever. Through Christ's victory, death has lost its sting. Because there is an empty tomb in Jerusalem we can face death in the sure knowledge that Christ has delivered us from the coming wrath and from eternal Judgment through salvation by the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary.

## **We Do Not Grieve as Those Who Have No Hope**

We grieve, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope. At this time when we feel such heartache, pain and loss, the Bible offers us great comfort, encouragement and direction in life. In the Bible we are told that it is better to go to a funeral than to a party - because the living should always be reminded that death waits for us all (Ecclesiastes 7:2). ***"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven; a time to be born and a time to die..."*** Ecclesiastes 3:1-2

## **You Have an Appointment**

There is one appointment none of us will miss. In fact, none of us will even be able to be late for this appointment. ***"It is appointed unto man once to die and after this to face Judgement."*** Hebrews 9:27. There is nothing more certain than death and nothing as uncertain as the time of dying. We should therefore be ready at all times for that which may come at any time. We do not know when, or under what circumstances, our lives will come to an end. But we do know that when we die we will stand before Almighty God - our Creator and Eternal Judge - and we will have to give an account of our lives - to Him.

***"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear His voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."*** John 5:28-29

***"For we must all appear before the Judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."*** 2 Corinthians 5:10

***"I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."*** Jeremiah 17:10

***"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the Throne and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. If anyone's name was not found written in the Book of Life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."*** Revelation 20:12-15

## **Live in the Light of Eternity**

At death we leave behind everything we **have** and we take with us all that we **are**. The character with which we die is the character with which we will appear at the Judgement. If you are prepared to die, then you are ready for anything. Until you are free to die - you are not free to live. It ought to be our business every day to prepare for our last day. If we take care of our life - then God will take care of our death. Being mindful of death should make us serious, industrious and conscientious.

As Cricketer, turned pioneer Missionary, C.T. Studd declared: ***"Only one life, it will soon be past - Only what's done for Christ will last"***

**We need to work out our priorities in the light of eternity. We need to invest our time and talents and treasure into those things that are going to last for eternity; our family, the people of God, the Word of God and the Kingdom of God. These are what are ultimately important.**

## **Choices**

Life is full of choices. We can make over a hundred choices in a day, from deciding when to get up, to what clothes to wear, what to have for breakfast, which things to do, how to do them, where to go, which route to take, when to accelerate or stop, who to phone, what E-mails to respond to, what articles to read. All day long we have to make choices, from the trivial and routine, to the important and vital, choices affecting our relationships, our health, safety and security.

Well, today, at Michiah's Memorial service we should make another choice: **Where are we going to spend eternity?** Some of us have already made that choice and can say: *I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. Praise the Lord! No turning back.* Others of us may not want to think about

our eternity right now. But, in time, death will come to us all. As we gather at any funeral we should soberly consider our immortal soul and the day when we stand before our eternal Creator and give an account of our life. At that point our choice will be final. What will God say to you on that great Day of Judgment. Will you hear: *"Well done! Good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord"*?

God is just and merciful. He is Holy and He is loving. Each one of us here today has to choose to face the reality that we only have one life and it will soon be past, only what is done for Christ will last. Are you living in accordance with the Creator's instructions (*the Manufacturer's Handbook*) in the Bible? Are you loving God and loving your neighbour? Do you forgive others when they offend you? Each one of us needs God to forgive us. We need to forgive our loved ones whatever we may have against them. We dare not carry grudges, bitterness or unforgiveness in our hearts. Forgive one another as God, in Christ, has forgiven you.

In the light of eternity, knowing that you are going to die and stand before the Creator and Eternal Judge, you need to review your life's work, your family relationships, habits and activities.

One day you and I will stand before the Judgement Throne of Christ where *"God will judge men's secrets..."* Romans 2:16, *"all the harsh words..."* Jude 15 and *"judge each man's work impartially..."* 1 Peter 1:17. ***"But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgement for every careless word they have spoken."*** Matthew 12:36. ***"So then, each of us will have to give an account of himself to God."*** Romans 14:12

**In eternity:** will any of us regret praying too much? Being too forgiving? Being too generous? Studying the Bible too intently? Sacrificing too much for others? Being too concerned about the welfare of others? Investing too much in our family? No, I do not believe any of us will regret being too forgiving and generous, in the light of eternity. But we will regret missed opportunities, unresolved conflicts and wasted time.

**If you knew that you were to die next year - what would you do differently this year?**

We must work out our priorities and repair our relationships, in the light of eternity.

We must be ready at all times for that which may happen at any time. **Are you ready?**

Can you say: ***"For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain!"*** Philippians 1:21

Dying Christ destroyed our death.  
Rising Christ restored our life.

***"Jesus said: 'Whoever hears My Word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has crossed over from death to life.'"*** John 5:24

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