

# Your Final Act of Worship

*The Excellence of Jesus*

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I am so very glad that you are here and I regret that those that are unable to be with us will not be here to hear from God's word here this evening because what we have in front of us is the final session of our series on the excellence of Jesus. We're going to look at it from a unique perspective. If you open to Hebrews 2, this is not our text but it is where I want to take your thoughts to begin with. The excellence of Jesus, the surpassing grandeur of our Lord Jesus Christ can be found in this: in that when we know him, when our trust is in him completely, he delivers us completely from the fear of death. There is nothing about death that needs to intimidate or frighten the true child of God who belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ, and Christ and the writers of Scripture make it clear that that is an aspect of his salvation for us, that he delivers us from the fear of death.

Hebrews 2:14 says, "Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives." Christ has conquered death. That is undeniable because he is resurrected. He has gone to the grave and he has come out on the other side and that has implications for those of us that belong to him, who are united to him, who belong to him. Because he has conquered death, it means that we will also. That is an unavoidable inescapable reality. That is what belongs to us today as believers in Christ that our victory over death is secure in him and because that is true, there is no reason to fear death whatsoever.

Now, having stated that, let's be clear and be candid about the nature of death. It is, indeed, a terrible force. It breaks the union of soul and body. It separates us from our loved ones and it takes those that have gone before us into a realm where we cannot talk with them, we cannot reach them, and the nagging gnawing sense of separation is something that in this life we cannot do away with. It is the consequence of sin. Death is an enemy to humanity and its horrible black force should never be underestimated or minimized for what it truly is, and it's only when we see it for its reality that we see by contrast the greatness of the victory that Christ has achieved for us and has achieved in his own glory by overcoming death. Death has lost its sting. "Where, O death, is your victory?" we read earlier from 1 Corinthians 15. And what we must understand and our fundamental premise in life in thinking about the inevitability of death, is that Christ has

conquered it through his resurrection and we as believers in Christ have also overcome death and share in his victory. That is a present possession that we have.

Now, I've been around in ministry long enough to know that this is true: you and I don't always lived that way. We don't always think that way and that can be measured in a few different ways. I'll mention just a couple. Even in Christian circles, there are those who absolutely refuse to think about death. They shut the topic down because it intimidates them. They don't want to think about it. They would rather do something else and so they just refuse to think about that which is absolutely inevitable. That is a place of stunted spiritual growth, at best. Some live in fear of death. It is a controlling fear for them. Maybe perhaps for some of you, the uncertainty of death, not knowing what lies beyond, or for some maybe just not knowing how we are going to die, just the fear of the process of death even if we are trusting in Christ to deliver us from it, the thought of the process of dying and wondering if it's going to be painful or sad and so we just try to push it out of our mind or we live in fear of it. Well, what we are going to do tonight is this: we're going to take our position of strength in Christ, the certainty of his resurrection, we are going to take the certainty of the truth of Scripture and we are going to look death square in the face as believers in Christ and we are going to realize something, we're going to find that the excellence of our Lord Jesus Christ is so vast and it is so great that he has the power to silence our fear and to give us a certain unconquerable hope so that we can approach death without any sense of regret, fear or retreat.

To do that, I want to turn your attention to John 21 with a somewhat underexposed passage of Scripture where Jesus was speaking to Peter after his resurrection, John 21:18 and 19. And just to set the context for you just very briefly here, the Lord, of course, has risen from the dead, he has restored Peter to ministry having asked him three times, "Peter, do you love me?" and three times Peter said, "Lord, you know that I love you," and that throughout the process Jesus says, "Then feed my lambs. Tend my sheep," restoring him to ministry in light of Peter's threefold affirmations which, in a sense, undid or contradicted his prior threefold denial of Christ on the eve of his crucifixion. So Jesus restores Peter publicly, asked him those three questions in front of the other disciples so that all would know that despite his earlier denials, Peter had recanted those denials and now Christ was appointing him and sending him into apostolic ministry.

It was a crucial point in the ministry of Peter but it didn't stop there. The Lord went on and said this to Peter in verse 18 and this is going to be our primary text for this evening, verses 18 and 19.

18 "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." 19 Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me!"

Follow me. And what we're going to do tonight is we're going to consider death in this manner. If you have never heard it this way, I delight in the fact of challenging your heart very deeply with what we're going to say tonight. Once again, I've left all timepieces out of the pulpit. I have no idea how long I'm going to speak and tonight I really really don't care.

("Amen.") Thank you. I appreciate that. That's one of many reasons why I love preaching to this blessed church.

We're going to look at four aspects of this under the title of "Your Final Act of Worship." Your final act of worship. In other words, what we are going to say is we are looking at the process of dying, our thinking about death as our final act of worship here on earth and that's what we're going to look at. And to deal with this, we need to kind of walk through the whole matter. Your final act of worship. Let's look, first of all, at the problem that we have, that we all have. The problem that we all have. Point 1 is this: it is the certainty of death. It is certain that you and I will die unless the Lord comes for us first and so we are dealing with something that is certain, that is guaranteed to happen.

Now look again at verse 18 and we will look at this in a little closer detail. Verse 18, "Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished," Peter, in your younger days, you had a freedom of movement that you enjoyed and that you took advantage of. He says, "but," by nature of contrast, "but when you grow old," things are going to be different. There is going to be a time coming, Peter, when "you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." Now, here Jesus is speaking specifically to Peter and telling Peter what's going to happen in his life. After the Lord has ascended, Peter goes through his ministry, he's telling Peter how his life is going to end and the term there or the phrase "stretch out your hands" is a reference to crucifixion. When a prisoner was prepared for crucifixion in those days, the soldiers would place the crossbeam upon his shoulders and they would tie his arms to it and he would be led away to death. His hands would be stretched out, tied to the crossbeam, and he would stagger to the ultimate place of his execution. Once there, they would take the crossbeam, attach it to the vertical beam, they would attach the man to the cross and he would be left to die. Jesus is saying, "Peter, you are going to be crucified at the end of your life." This is what God had appointed for Peter was death by crucifixion and it was a certainty. This is what was going to happen even though it was still 30 years further into the future at the time that Jesus spoke these words to Peter. He says, "Peter, you are going to die and here is how you are going to die."

Now, you and I read that today and you might very well say, "What on earth does that possibly have anything to do with me? I am not Peter. Crucifixion has been outlawed in the world in all civilized places for over 1,700 years. This has nothing to do with me." Well, the truth of the matter is, beloved, that you are much more like Peter than you think, than you might realize. You see, Jesus told Peter what the nature of death was that was appointed for him. That's what God had appointed for Peter. My friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, here's the reality for you: that God has equally planned the

circumstances and the timing of your death. You don't have the benefit of a prior knowledge of what it is going to be like. I say a benefit, it's probably a mercy. I'm sure that it is a mercy that we don't know. But you should understand going back to all of the things that we've been talking about of the sovereignty of God over the past many months, you should understand that God has appointed the time and the nature of the way that you will depart this life. You don't know the details but God has planned them and he will certainly bring them to pass as he directs your life in the days to come. Whether it's tonight, whether it's 75 years from now, the outcome is the same. We are all moving toward the appointed time that God has established for us to depart from this life.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 2 says, "there is a time for every event under heaven. A time to give birth and a time to die." Hebrews 9:27 says, "it is appointed for men to die once." It is appointed that this is what the outcome of our lives are going to be. We are not going to evade it. We cannot go around it. The end of life is certain for us and in the secret knowledge of God, he already knows exactly how your passing will take place, you just don't have divine revelation to tell you in advance what it is going to be like but it is certain. Death is certain and so I phrase it as a problem, the problem that we have from an earthly perspective, from a human perspective is death is a reality and a certainty that is facing us and so that's the problem that we are dealing with and addressing.

Now, secondly, the second point this evening is that we could say: what is the purpose? What is your purpose in death or in the process of dying? Here is your purpose and, beloved, it's no different than any other day in your life. Your purpose in death is the glory of God. The purpose in your death, the purpose in the process of dying is the glory of God. Let me state it more directly and with a greater sense of perhaps authority in accordance with the authority of the word of God. My brother and sister in Christ, please let this sink into your mind and make it clear because it will serve you well when the time comes: your duty, your responsibility in death is to glorify God.

Look at verse 19 with me. "Now this He said," this is the Apostle John's commentary and explanation of what Jesus had just said, "Peter, this is the way you're going to die," and the Apostle John adds his inspired commentary on what those words mean. "Now this Jesus said," in other words, "signifying by what kind of death he," meaning Peter, "would glorify God." Jesus said this in order to demonstrate and to manifest by what kind of death Peter was going to glorify God and tradition tells us this about the death of Peter: Peter was, indeed, crucified during Nero's persecution in the middle AD 60s, and what I love about it, what endears Peter to your heart in addition to all of the bumbling and bravery that he showed in the Gospels and then in the book of Acts after the resurrection of the Lord, one of the things that I love about Peter is this, maybe you've heard this, Peter asked his executioners to crucify him upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same way that his Lord had died. So he says, "Crucify me upside down," and the soldiers obliged his request. What was Peter doing there? He regarded his life as of no account and he honored Christ as he died. Beloved, think about it, that what was on his mind on the doorstep of death, what was preeminent in his mind was the honor and glory of his Lord and he says, "Don't crucify me like him because I'm not worthy of that. Better

that my death would defer to the greater glory of Christ than that you would just execute me in the same way." That's how Peter glorified God in his death.

Now, my friends, you say, "Okay, I'm trying really hard to follow you here but I have no idea where this is going. I'm not going to be crucified upside down. What does this have to do with me?" Fair question. As you might guess, I have an answer for you. Again, my friends, you are more similar to Peter in this than you realize. The desire to glorify God in your death should be yours as well. Scripture makes this abundantly clear. Peter glorified God in his death and when your mind goes to this subject in your own mind and thinking, you should say to yourself in your heart as a prayer to God, "God, what I want is when that time comes, I want to honor and glorify you when it comes."

This is the clear implication of all biblical teaching about the Christian life. So for example in 1 Corinthians 10:31 it says, "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Do it all to the glory of God. In Colossians 3:17, you don't need to turn there, Colossians 3:17 says, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." Again, we come back to what I say so often from this pulpit: you establish great, broad, general principles that apply in every circumstance and then you apply them in particulars. The great broad principle is that your privilege and your responsibility as well as mine, is that whatever we do with the breath that God gives us, we give honor and we give glory to him and we respond to life in a manner that trusts him and displays his glory. That's what we do everywhere. That's what we do every day. That's what our time is to be spent on and the fact that we fall short of that does not excuse or change the obligation. It's the desire of the true believing heart that that's what we want even when our lives fall short of our highest and best aspirations.

Now, beloved, here's the deal and I'm going to speak to you on the assumption that most of you have a little bit of fear and trembling in your heart as you contemplate death because I haven't preached on this before and so I speak to help you, to strengthen you, to encourage you, to ennoble and to embolden you. That's the whole point of this, not to correct you for prior fears that you have. We want to go from fear to faith, from tears to triumph, from being afraid to being confident. So we have to address these things directly. Beloved, fear and even pain do not suspend your commitment to honor Christ in all things. Fear does not excuse that and so we are not in a position where we can just become absorbed in the process of dying and collapse under the weight of our fears. No, we have to transcend that because fear and panic in the face of death does not glorify God. That is not the right way for Christians to approach death. It's not the right way for us to think about death and you will ennoble the dying process as you see it as your final act of worship in this life. As the challenge, as the moment comes, you say, "Aha, I'm ready for this. Christ preeminently has saved me. Christ has risen from the dead. I am united with him and I will pass through this and come out safe on the other side." So you approach it from that perspective. "I'm confident in Christ," you say, "this is my final act. I want to go out on a climax not in defeat." And beyond that, you have the indwelling Holy Spirit who will help and strengthen you in your hour of extremity without fail to do so.

So let's think about this. Let's illustrate this. Let's think through the way this works. For some, some get the terminal cancer diagnosis and they descend toward death like a plane coming in to landing and over time, the wheels hit the ground. Death approaches like that and you can see the runway ahead and you have time to think and prepare for it. By contrast, a seminary friend of mine who I sat right next to in my earliest seminary days, was hit by a drunk driver as he was going out with his son and a friend to get donuts late at night. In the most unexpected way, death came on him suddenly. He lived long enough to look at his three-year-old son in the backseat and tell him, "You go with the firemen. I'm going to see Jesus." He honored Christ in his dying hour, in his dying moments, and manifested in a way that I have never forgotten, this happened in Pennsylvania, manifested in a way that I have never forgotten, that supernatural confidence that comes from knowing Christ in the hour of extremity and here we are some 20 years later talking about it tonight. He glorified Christ in his death. God bless him. God bless him.

The details of how we depart this life are utterly secondary. It's really not even important in the context of what we're talking about here, what makes the circumstances, what difference does that make? The key is that you and I have a settled resolve in our hearts to trust Christ when it does come and the question then is: what does that look like? What does trusting Christ in that moment, in that hour, in that season of life, what does that look like? And we say this, here's what it looks like. How do you treat death as your final act of worship? You face it with faithful courage. You face it with faithful courage. You trust the love of God and the faithfulness of Jesus Christ to bring you into his presence. In your heart, you believe at the moment when it most depends on it, when the most is at stake, you are staking this transition from life into death, you are staking the fullness of everything that you have and everything that you are on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ and you have it settled in your mind, "I know that he will not let me down. I know that there is no way that he will abandon me in this hour of my need. He has been with me through all of my lesser needs. It's unthinkable that he would leave me now." What does Romans 8 say? Romans 8:38 and 39, the Apostle Paul said, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Beloved, I say this with passion and yet I say it with pastoral gentleness to you to encourage and help and strengthen you, it's to realize that in the hour when it most counts, Christ will most manifest his faithfulness to us and he will not abandon us to the moment of our extremity. So as you look forward to that, I realize it's not, "Oh great!" it's like Christmas day. You could think about it that way but that's not the sense in which I'm saying it. As you contemplate that, as you anticipate it, as you are in the middle of it, you say, "No, my soul is at rest. My soul is at peace. I am unafraid. Why? Not because of anything in me but because Christ has taken ownership of my soul. I belong to him and I am utterly certain that he will deal with me faithfully, he will protect me, he will keep me even as I pass through the river, so to speak, and he will bring me out on the other side. What have I to fear?" And you face death with faithful courage.

So we've seen the problem is the certainty of death; we have seen the purpose to glorify God in death, and we do that by manifesting faithful courage in the face of it. Let's go to point 3 and see the provision that we have for this. The provision for this and the provision is this: it is spiritual understanding. The provision is spiritual understanding. The way that you think will govern the way that you respond in this time, and really the things of which we are about to speak transcend the dying process. These are really just things that are fundamental to Christianity but we are going to apply them in specific ways to your final act of worship. The provision of spiritual understanding and I believe that there are three, we'll call them steps, that will help you when you realize death is approaching. These things are utterly transforming, they are undeniably true, they are that which we can build with certainty and confidence on this foundation and know that our confidence in Christ is not misplaced. Stated in a positive way: to know that our trust is in the object that will not betray it, that will not fail it.

Beloved, let's just park it there for just a moment. Isn't it true that Jesus Christ will never fail you? Isn't that true? Those of you that belong to Christ can answer that with an absolute certainty, "Yes, that is true. Christ is Lord, Christ is faithful. He has promised to keep me. He has said that no one will pluck me out of the Father's hand and therefore I could not be in a more secure place whether I am sitting in this room on Tuesday night on July 25, 2017, or if I am on my deathbed." Nothing has changed for you whether you're sitting here in good health on a beautiful summer evening or if you are in the sweat of death on your deathbed. Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed because you are still in the faithful hand of Christ who will never let you go. That is the defining reality of what it means to belong to Christ. Okay? Okay.

Now with that in mind, because those things are true, let's work this out in three different steps. So point 3 has three sub points here. And what can we say about this step 1: let go of this world. Let go of this world. When death is approaching you say, "I'm ready to let go of it." My friend looked back at his son and said, "Son, I'm letting go of you in order to depart and be with Christ." Step 1: let go of this world.

Now, let's just think through this, think through what we're doing here, what we're talking about. You know, most of us as I look out on you and know almost every one of you by name in this room, most of us enjoy life to one degree or another and we should. God blesses us. "Every good and faithful gift comes from above from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shifting shadows." So God blesses us. We have our difficulties, sure, but especially here all of us are living in a comparative degree of prosperity and security that is unknown to most of the world elsewhere and so we enjoy that. Most of us have loved ones or friends around us that we find satisfaction and joy in our relationships with them, even though we have other relationships that are a pain in the neck, we have other friends that we enjoy, and so it's good and it's proper for us to enjoy that and to give thanks to God as we do. But this world is not our home. We have not been saved for this world and therefore we do not give this world our highest affections. Jesus made this abundantly clear and said that this was an aspect of true discipleship, of truly following him.

Turn over, if you would, to Matthew 6:19, a verse that we will get to on Sunday mornings in the near future, probably in September some time. Matthew 6:19, Jesus stated it plainly when he said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal." Don't store up your highest treasures, your highest affections, your deepest loves, don't set them on objects that are here and tied to this life, he says, because this life eventually takes them away from you. They rust away, moths eat the clothing, earthquakes knock down the buildings, disease takes away your health, loved ones, children, move away, and sometimes even turn on you. And we learn that this world at its best is transitory, it's fleeting, it's passing and we can't guarantee that the things that we love today will be with us tomorrow. 1 John 2:17 says, "This world is passing away." Now, beloved, what Scripture is bringing to our attention here is absolutely fundamental to your entire outlook on life. Everything about life is subsumed under this point of not setting your treasures and affections on it.

So you hold life with an open hand. You let go of this world in the sense that says, "God, I am so thankful for what's in my hand here but I don't have my fist clenched around it. I realize that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. And Father, in light of that, what can I say except blessed be the name of the Lord. So Lord," you say in your mind, you settle this deep in your heart and this transcends the act of dying, this is how you approach all of life, you say, "Lord, I love you more than the gifts you give, and if the gifts are removed from me, Lord, I still love you all the same, and in some ways, Lord, even more because when the gifts are taken away, I see with greater clarity the surpassing excellence of the sufficiency of Christ to bring comfort and joy to my soul." So you can let go of this world. So when death approaches, you say in your mind, "Life has been good but it was never my ultimate goal. I was just a pilgrim passing through. I was journeying on my way to another destination. And O Lord, the journey has been sweet and filled with your blessings but now death is knocking on my door. Lord, I can leave now because I'm content to be in your hand. I'm confident that you will bring me through to the other side, and even though I can't see it with my eyes, dear Lord, I do not walk by sight, I walk by faith which is more certain, and I walk by faith in your certain word and your word says that no one can pluck me out of your hand, that nothing can separate me from the love of Christ, and therefore I confident, I am unafraid, I have courage as I face this moment, dear God." And the sweet beauty of it is that while we form those convictions in our soul, the Holy Spirit is going to be with us to strengthen and bring these things to mind and encourage and help us in our hour of weakness.

Now I realize that not everybody has the opportunity to consciously go through this process. Some have the blessing of dying in their sleep. Some fall over dead from a heart attack and they don't have the time to think about it. But I want you to be prepared to glorify God in your death and not just assume that that's going to happen for all of us. Let's be ready for the ultimate challenge of life, the ultimate challenge to our faith so that we can win in the end. There are enough of you who are present or past athletes to know something about competition and you play to win, don't you? You don't play to lose. Well, we are in a spiritual contest against the weakness of our flesh and it's our desire to win the greatest battle that we face if the Lord calls us to have opportunity to think about it.



So you let go of this world, that's step 1. Secondly, this could be a subpoint of "let go of this world," but this is the hardest one for many, those of you that come from families that are close, this might be the most difficult one but all the more reason to embrace it and succeed. Step 2: commit your loved ones to the Lord. Commit your loved ones to Christ. Now, this is really really foundational. This goes to the very core of who we are and this is where Christ asserts his Lordship even over this. Brothers and sisters in Christ, even your most noble, God-honoring, loving, trusting, earthly relationships are not grounds for you to cling to this life when death comes. Let me say that again: even your most noble earthly relationships, husband/wife, reflecting the relationship of Christ to the church, noble, holy, God-ordained, even that is not grounds to cling to this life when death approaches. We trust the Lord even for them, even for your children, and I say it gently, even for your unsaved children. You commit all of them to Christ.

Let's go back to John 21. You thought I had strayed so far from the text I would never find my way back but we did. John 21:20. Remember in verse 19 that Jesus had said, "Peter, you're going to be stretched out, carried someplace where you don't want to go. Now follow Me!" And that command "follow Me" is really what we're talking about here. Everything that we're talking about here this evening is simply the practical outworking of what it means to follow Christ even in death. This is all under that one umbrella and one of the foundational marks of a true Christian is he's someone who follows Christ. So we follow Christ even in death. What does that look like as death is approaching? We let go of this world because Christ is infinitely more precious to us than anything in this world.

But Peter says in verse 20, he's got a question about this. There are people around him that are affected by what Christ just said and so Peter asks the Lord a question in verse 20, John 21. "Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; the one who also had leaned back on His bosom at the supper and said, 'Lord, who is the one who betrays You?'" A reference, a self-reference by the writer of the Gospel of John to himself. Peter looks back, he is with the Lord, maybe a few steps removed and he thinks, "Oh, but John is here. Lord, what about John? You know, you just told me what's going to happen to me but what about John here? What are you going to do with him?" So verse 21, I got ahead of the text there, "So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, 'Lord, and what about this man?'" What about John? What's going to happen to him? I want to know. You've told me what's going to happen to me, now I want to know what about John? He's thinking about other human relationships in the context of having been told how he was going to die and Jesus somewhat rebukes him in verse 22, "Jesus said to him, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!'" Here's what Jesus is saying to him, okay? Jesus is telling Peter, "Peter, you be content to follow me and you leave others to the will of God. Leave your closest human relationships to the will of God and you focus on following me, of what I am saying to you about your life. Focus on that and leave the others to the will of God."

Now, we are entering into the realm here with what I'm about to say of the tenderest affections of your entire life, your most loved relationships, and we need to deal with this

so that we can think all the way through it. When death comes, you're going to be faced with saying goodbye. I've been with friends in the moment of their dying as they were saying goodbye to their loved ones. This is very real in my mind, very real in my memory, the reality of this as families gather around and say their final goodbyes and it's poignant, it's powerful, it's very bittersweet even for Christians to realize that a lifelong journey is coming to an end. I remember my dear friend, Bob G., who is now in heaven and being in his home as his wife Doris had had one of those long descents of a very long illness and so they had known for months and months that she was going to die and they had taken her out of the hospital and brought her home to the place that she had nurtured for so many years and had so much loving family interaction, and brought her home so that she could pass away at home. She was in a hospital bed in the middle of their living room and the family is kind of gathered around and I'm standing with Bob at the foot of her bed and he is looking at her and he kind of had forgotten that I was there, I think, and he's just looking at his wife and he was such a tenderhearted, godly man, and I miss him so much, and I remember standing next to him as he looked at his wife and she is labored in her breathing and it's not going to be long and he started to weep and he said, "Oh, my darling, 62 years," that's how long they had been married. "Oh, my darling, 62 years wasn't enough." Isn't that sweet?

This is the passing and we realize how noble and sweet and godly that sentiment is, but as we think about our own dying and think about our own separation from our loved ones that comes when death knocks on our door, so to speak, here's the way that you need to think when it's your time to depart and to be with Christ. You need to think this way: God created your loved ones, God is guiding your loved ones, God has a purpose for your loved ones that transcends your presence and that is not dependent on your contribution in order to bring it to pass. God...you see, everything is about knowing God and knowing Christ, isn't it? Everything is about that. If you know Christ, all this stuff just flows naturally. If you don't know Christ, you are alone on the midst of entering the abyss. I would encourage you to come to Christ. But for those of us that know him, we think like this as we are thinking about this, of committing our loved ones to Christ. We say, "My Christ is good. My Christ is wise. My Christ is in control." And therefore you remember those things and you say, "Okay, here's what I do, as I am approaching death, I am going to leave my loved ones with Christ and not carry the burden about what happens after my departure on my heart. I am going to leave them with Christ. I am going to trust Christ. I have trusted him with my soul, I have entrusted my sin to his cleansing blood, I'm going to trust him for other important things, lesser important things, my loved ones, I'm going to entrust even them to Christ as well." This is what true discipleship to Christ is like.

I want you to turn to Matthew 10:37 and see this, that when the moment comes, when the process of death descends upon your life, that you have it settled in your mind, "I'm ready now to leave my loved ones behind and to follow Christ as he leads me through the valley of the shadow of death." Christ said in Matthew 10:37, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it," in other words he who grasps onto this life, he's going to lose his soul, "and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it."

One of the ways that Christ asserts his Lordship over your soul is this: Christ say, "You must love me more than everyone else in your life." Christ is first in your affections and there is no one in second place by comparison so that when the time of death comes, we think the best of you all, you've been faithful in these relationships, you've given yourself to them, people have benefited from your love and care, your family and all of that, they have benefited from you and you have loved them and it's been so close and so intimate and so sweet, but it's in your mind that as sweet as that is, it is secondary to my greater affection to Christ. And why is it secondary? Have it clear in your mind as much as we love these human loved ones, wives, parents, children, others, you understand, don't you, that not a one of them spilled their blood to save your soul. Not one of them came down from heaven in order to give their life so that your sins could be forgiven. Not one of them bled for you. Not one of them died for you. Not one of them rose for you. Not one of them has been in heaven representing you before the holy Father. No one has done that. Our best of relationships aren't even in the same realm as that.

So when that's clear in your mind, you say, "Ah, yes, it's time for me to depart and be with Christ. I love him more, I love him supremely. Dear loved ones, I'm on my way to my most Beloved." This is what it means to follow Christ and to belong to him and, beloved, embrace that. Love it with all of your heart. Recognize the beauty and the wonder of that and say, "Yes, that is true." And do so with this thought in your mind, have this equally clear in your mind: the fact that you love Christ more doesn't mean that you love your human loved ones less. You don't love them less because you love Christ more. Not at all. In fact, this is what frees us to love them unselfishly.

So Christ has told us plainly that our love for him must be of such a quality that it transcends even our most close earthly relationships and that serves you at the time of death and allows you to depart in peace, looking up with anticipation, as it were, rather than looking back and going forward where you are in danger of tripping. And as parents, we need to have this really clear in our minds, don't we? That we love Christ even more than our children.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones' biographer, Ian Murray, whose every book is worthy of reading, Ian Murray said this about Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He was interviewing the great Dr. at the end of his life. Martyn Lloyd-Jones had had an extended illness and knew that his time was coming and Ian Murray who was his, Martyn Lloyd-Jones', assistant back in the fifties and so he knew him well and was close and is still close to the family, for that matter, he wrote this in his biography about Martyn Lloyd-Jones and he said this and I quote, "As with every Christian husband, father and grandfather, he had not found it easy to contemplate leaving a much loved family but he now had assurance that all would be well for them." And he quotes Martyn Lloyd-Jones as saying this, "When this illness came, I tended to worry as to what would happen to them. I have been delivered from it completely. I know that God can care for them very much better than I can and that no longer troubles me at all." You see it, don't you? Does that not glorify the God and the Christ that he proclaimed so faithfully for decades, to say that I can trust even my dearest and best, I can trust them even to this friend that I haven't heaven. I can trust them to him and know that they will be well in my absence.

Faithful courage in the face of death even to the extent of committing your loved ones to Christ and trusting him for what he does in your absence. You don't need to be here to know the outcome. You don't need to be here for God to care for them. And so you can let go. You can let your heart go and not be consumed with worry, "What's going to happen to my children or my grandchildren when I'm gone?" Well, I'll tell you what's going to happen, God is going to be in control and God is going to work out his will, and in that you can rest. That's all you need to know. That's all you need to know. God is good, God has been faithful to you. He will care for everything that concerns you, including that which you leave behind. That's how great and how good he is that you can trust him to that great extent. I'll say it one more time: you don't love them less by entrusting them to Christ.

Well, I say that we should get to the good stuff now. We've kind of dealt with the negative aspects, let's go to step 3. What we said, we are talking about the spiritual provision that we have which is spiritual understanding, three steps that provide that for us: we let go of this world, we commit our loved ones to Christ, here is step 3 and now finally we get to the good stuff. Now we are starting to cook with the glories of what it means to be a Christian and to be on the brink of going to heaven. This is the good stuff. This is the sweetest of flowers in the meadow for the heart that belongs to Christ.

Look forward to heaven. First of all, what do we look forward to in heaven? Let's start at the bottom and work our way up and the bottom is great. What can we look forward to in heaven? First of all, the absence of affliction. The absence of affliction, you could say the absence of affliction and sin. Heaven will bring the end to suffering. Revelation 21:4 says, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain." That's what awaits us in heaven, a total absence of affliction and us removed from the powers and presence of sin in our lives. I can't wait. I can't wait to stop being tormented by the continual temptations of this world, of my own flesh, of the devil, however those three work together in harmony to work against my spiritual life. I cannot wait for the absence of that. I cannot wait for the permanent eternal comfort when death is no longer remembered and the separation that I feel from loved ones is not even a memory anymore. Not only is it past, it is not even remembered. And that every sorrow that you have ever cried over is going to somehow be more than recompensed in the presence of God as he wipes away each tear and satisfies every disappointed longing of your heart in the presence of heaven.

That's a reason to look forward to heaven, leaving this world behind, looking forward to that. That's going to be great, but there's more. And all of this is what feeds your faithful courage in the hour of extremity. Secondly, what else can we look forward to? We can look forward to the presence of the saints. We can look forward to the presence of the saints that have gone before us. We will be reunited with those who have died in the Lord. Scripture describes God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob long after they had died. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob which means that they have their identities now as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as he reigns over them. Even now long after their death, he is their God which means that their existence continues on in recognizable

distinct form. At the transfiguration in Matthew 17, Peter recognized Moses and Elijah centuries after their departure having never seen them before.

Somehow after death, we will have recognizable personalities. We will know and be reunited with believers who went before us. This is incredible. Do you know what that means? Do you know what that means? That means that I for the first time am going to see my sister Debbie in heaven. I'll meet her for the first time there. I am going to see once again Bob G. and Bob M. and Carol P. and Mike T. and countless others that I have known and loved in Christ in this life. Reunions abounding and I ask myself: would I stay here and miss that? Not a chance. Not a chance. I love every one of you, I love being with you, but given the choice when it comes time to heaven, I'll see you up there. I'll see you there, I'm not going to stay here and miss that. That's too much to miss. That's a reason to look forward. So it's not just that we say, "Okay, I'm letting go of what I have here," there is that aspect of it but that's the negative side of it. The positive side is there is so much to look forward to. Removed from sin and reunited with the saints that have gone before, that is going to be utterly spectacular in a way that human language cannot describe. It's going to be great. I'm ready right now.

But that's not even the best part. That's not even the best part. As great as that is, that's not even the best part. The best part is going to be the presence of Christ. The presence of Christ. He whom we have loved by faith in this life, somehow it's going to become sight. My brother and sister in Christ, you are going to see the one who saved your soul. You're going to see him and be in his presence in a way that is distinct and transcendent over the way that we have walked in this life. Philippians 1:23. By the way, if you think that I'm just a little bit crazy and nuts about this, how can you say that, well, this is to be the Christian experience. This is to be our Christian attitude toward this life. I want you to see this.

Turn to Philippians 1. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul was saying in Philippians 1. He said in Philippians 1:21, he said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake." He says, "The Lord has appointed a time for me to remain a little longer. This is necessary. This is what it is for the time. I accept that. I embrace it but as I do, it's very clear in my mind that when I go and be with Christ, that's going to be a whole world better than what I have here." And we manifest our love for Christ with that anticipation. The Apostle John said in chapter 3 of his first epistle, we will see him just as he is. And my friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ guarantees all of this for us. Scripture says that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus.

So we have these wonderful promises about the absence of affliction, the presence of the saints, the presence of Christ, all of which are unseen to us today as we sit here, as we stand here today, but we know the resurrection of Christ, we have the promise of God who says, "You know how I raised Christ from the dead? Scripture says I will do that for

you as well." And therefore we have this on greater certainty than whether we get home tonight or not. All of these things of which we have spoken are so certain that we could speak about them as present tense possessions. They are that certain. You could speak about it as past tense. This is over. This is done. This has been determined by God. This is what will happen in a way that I know with greater certainty than I know what will happen to me tomorrow.

So beloved, when death approaches, remember the promise of seeing your Lord. It brings another sweet dear saint to my mind. I've mentioned him before but most of you won't remember. Dear Roy A. who was in his late 80s. I had a great privilege. I knew it was a privilege at that time but I didn't realize how great a privilege it was in my earliest years of ministry as I was just starting out on a volunteer basis. I got involved with an older saint ministry at Grace Community Church and all of these people had been nurtured by stellar Bible teaching for many years, manifested this kind of faithful courage to me as they went through their own shadow of death, and part of the reason why I can speak with such certainty and clarity and to call you to this without hesitation is I've seen this repeated over and over again from the lives of people who have gone before. I've watched them do this. I know that this is the way that it is to be done; that this is the way that Christians are to think about death, the way that they can and should approach it, and it is the blessing that they have. There is nothing for us to fear in death, nothing whatsoever.

Dear Roy taught me that or illustrated it for me, I should say. Roy's wife had serious dementia in her latter days and you know how that goes. Well, I was called by their daughter to the bedside, told that Roy didn't have much longer to live, and as often was the case in those precious opportunities, I was ushered back to the most private part of their home into their bedroom and I walk into their bedroom and they are laying side-by-side to each other holding hands. Precious. Just a precious, precious memory. After all of their years of marriage and Jesse is laying there diminished mentally in a way that she really doesn't know what's happening, but she knows enough that she loves the man that she is next to and she is holding his hand. Roy's mind is as clear as a bell and so I knelt down beside him and talked to him. We had been friends for a long time. I love Roy. I can't wait to see him. I said, "Roy, tell me your thoughts." I knew he was dying, he knew he was dying, he knew that I knew he was dying. One of the things I love about ministry in times like that is all the pretense is gone. There is so much pretense in ministry, can be. The process of dying strips all of that away. I love that.

I said, "Roy, tell me your thoughts." Holding his wife's hand and he's looking over at me and he says, "Don, I just want to go home and be with the Lord. I just want to go home and be with the Lord." He wasn't defeated as he said that. It was one of his final statements of the triumph of his faith. "Don, I know what's going to happen and that's what I want. I want to go and be with the Lord." He squeezes his wife's hand. I'm embellishing this part, maybe squeezes his wife's hand just a little bit more as he says that to me. Utter serenity, utter confidence, utter peace permeating the room. We prayed together. Said goodbye for now to him, awaiting that great reunion with him as well around the throne. I just hope that he's not so close to the throne that I'm in back that I don't get to see him again.

When death approaches, beloved, remember the promise of Christ, remember the promise of seeing him. That is what gives you the power to transcend the moment and not be swallowed up in fear, not to be regretful, but in utter peace and serenity say, "Now is the time. Lord, here I am. Bring me home." That glorifies God.

Well, whenever I preach about heaven, I never want to leave the realm. I always come to the point where I have to kind of step out of the mental realm of heaven and come back to today and I'm at that pivot point here. You know, part of me just wants to stop and just stay here just a little bit longer in the realm of heaven but it's probably 10 o'clock for all I know and for all I care.

I said four points. The question now is this: what about today? What about today? We've look forward in kind of two stages, we've look forward to the certain fact of death, maybe there is a process to it for some of us, maybe for some of us it's not. We've looked past death into heaven and see why our heart can be full of joy and hope and anticipation even as we leave our loved ones behind. Now we have to come back, we have to circle back to today and ask the question: what about today? What do we do with this? What do we do with all of this? Most likely none of us are going to face death this evening so what we do in the meantime as we wait on God to work out his plan for our lives. Point 4, here's the plan: it is simply faithful obedience. Faithful obedience.

Christ outlined it for Peter in verse 19. Go back to John 21:19. You could say it is faith and faithful obedience. You trust Christ and your trust is manifested in faithful obedience. Verse 19, Jesus said this "signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God," by which we mean Peter would glorify God, "And when [Jesus] had spoken this, He said to [Peter], 'Follow Me!'" Follow Me! Peter, between now and this time when you are carried away against your wishes, simply occupy yourself with your daily walk with me, with Christ. He says, "Follow me day by day. I've told you to tend my sheep, feed my lambs. Go and do that while in the interim, while you're waiting for this to come. Follow me." Follow Christ in your daily life.

You know, the beauty and the simplicity of this is utterly magnificent and stunning. In one sense, there is nothing dramatic that you need to get up and do in response to the things that we have talked about here this evening. I'm not calling you to do something radical, contrary to your desires or anything like that. What do we do with all of this while we are here today waiting for the Lord to work out these purposes? You just occupy yourself with your daily walk with Christ.

So I ask you this question: where has Christ put you today? What is your realm of relationships? What is your realm of responsibility? What you do with all of this is you simply follow him in the ordinary details of life and Christ will use your faithfulness to prepare you to face death with courage. You anchor it in your mind, "All of these unseen things of faith are true and this governs my perspective and this is the way that I live life and this is what I bank everything on." Okay? Then you say, "Oh yeah, what do I have to do today? Okay, I'm going to do that as well to the glory of God. I'm going to take care of

these details to the glory of God." And as we walk through those things, always keeping our eyes on Christ, always trusting in him, always drawing strength from his many unfulfilling promises to us, one day soon enough the day will come of which we speak and, beloved, based on the promise of Scripture, my confidence in the Holy Spirit and the faithfulness of Christ, I assure you that when the moment comes for you to depart this life, you will find Christ manifesting his supreme faithfulness to you yet once again and he will surround you and strengthen you and help you and show that your faith in him was never in vain.

Bow with me in prayer.

*O God, how great and precious are your promises to us. How great and precious is the Lord Jesus Christ. How magnificent and wonderful is the salvation that you have given to us in him. How delightful, how joyful, how good to be in Christ and to know that all of these things and infinitely more belong to us in our Lord Jesus. I pray now that you would take the things of which we have spoken, settle our hearts where perhaps fear has reigned, reassure the areas where perhaps we falter and are weak. And Lord, with faces upturned toward heaven, as it were, in a sense of anticipation, looking up, looking out, looking as it were, to where Christ is, setting our minds on heaven and not on the things of this earth, Father, all of these things which we know to be true from your word, we pray that you would honor them as we have embraced them here this evening. And I pray for each one here, Father, that not a one of them would be lost; that every soul here would know Christ with certainty; that every man and woman, boy and girl, either now or in the future would put their faith in Christ in order to be saved from their sins, knowing that every one who believes in Christ will most certainly be saved. And Father, we who have believed in Christ, we have been saved, we are being saved and we will be saved, justified, sanctified and glorified, all belonging to us, all manifestations of the great gift of salvation that the lover of our souls has bestowed upon us and purchased at the cross at the price of his own lifeblood. Lord Jesus, of course we trust you. Of course we love you more than anything and more than anyone. Of course. Of course. Of course. Of course. Of course. And by confidence in your word and by faith in you, we believe that the best is still very much yet to come. So we say with humble inadequate words, "Jesus, thank you so very much." Amen.*

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