

Death and Resurrection

Job 19:23–27; Acts 9:36–43

Last month my sister's dear mother-in law died. Betty Jane Knaebel was 95. She was always a vivacious woman, but had wasted away on account of old age. She spent much of last year curled up in a fetal position, longing to go home to heaven. I had known this dear lady since I was a boy. She and her husband Carl were a devoted couple, married over 76 years! Norma and I shared a wedding anniversary with them. Their marriage lasted longer than either of us has lived. Betty's funeral was held a week ago Friday in Georgia. Because of Covid, not many people were able to attend. She faithfully served in the church where I grew up. Now, her husband Carl, who had stayed at her bedside for months, is alone. She is gone. Death is is not pretty.

I remember when I was in grade school, and the teacher asked the students how many of us had been to a funeral. There were a handful that had never been to one. No doubt death has affected every one of them by now. At our class 50th anniversary a few years ago there was a display of 65 senior class photos of classmates who had died—over 10% of our graduating class—and I'm sure that number has increased since then. One of those photos was of a girl in my class who was killed in a fatal car accident as she drove up to Midland to begin college at Northwood Institute—now Northwood University. There was at least one other classmate as well who died within months of graduation. When we graduated, most of us felt we had the world by the tail; a whole lifetime of possibilities lay before us; but for some, death would come within a short time.

Experience teaches us that death is a part of life. The Bible says, “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). All men know this, deep down in their consciences: ultimately, there will be an appointment with death, followed by an appointment before the Judge of all the earth. There will be no getting out of that appointment.

Our sermon today is entitled “Death and Resurrection.” Looking at that title in the bulletin you might surmise that my talk would be about the death and resurrection of Christ. Now that will indeed be a part, but today we will look at a lady named Dorcas, also known as Tabitha. Both the Aramaic *Tabitha* and the Greek *Dorcas* mean graceful doe or gazelle. As we learned in a previous sermon, Dorcas was a simple person who loved to sew, and she was good at it. She wasn't a pastor, elder or deacon; she held no official office. She was a private person who saw a need—poor widows around her who were destitute, who had no husband to support them, who had no prospects for remarriage, some who had dependent children that needed to be cared for. These women were in need of clothing. Clothing was relatively expensive in those days; it took many man-hours to make a garment. Dorcas, seeing the need of poor widows around her, used her limited

means, her love for Christ and her skill of sewing to do the Lord's work. She dedicated herself to the Lord and she sat down to sew. And she made a difference. This is the only place we read about her in the Bible, and what a story it is!

As we meet Dorcas, she has just died. The church is grieving her death. The widows she loved have gathered to wash her body and prepare it for burial. Two of the Christian brothers have been sent to Joppa, about eight miles away, to fetch the apostle Peter.

What is her condition? She is dead. *Death* is defined as the permanent cessation of all vital functions, the end of life. Dorcas has ceased to breathe. All her vital functions have ceased. Death has overtaken her. Nothing more can be done for her, humanly speaking. But the Lord Jesus Christ, ministering through the apostle Peter, raises her to physical life. Her cold, lifeless body warms up. Her color returns. Stiffened muscles and tissues become supple and pliable again. She opens her eyes. She sits up. Her reason, understanding, ability to converse, and memory return. She recognizes her friends and is able to function and engage in conversation once again. The church is overjoyed. Dorcas has experienced death, but through the power of Christ she has been restored to life. She has, in a sense, experienced death and resurrection.

Now we encountered this once before in the story of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, and friend of the Lord Jesus. Lazarus had died, and his sisters were overcome with grief. They sent for Jesus. Jesus, however, was a little further away, on the other side of the Jordan River, a two-day journey away. By the time he got to Bethany, near Jerusalem, Lazarus had been dead four days, and was already buried. The mourners are gathered at the home of Mary and Martha. Jesus is led to the tomb and commands, "Take the stone away." Martha protests: "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days." But a few of the stronger men roll the stone away, and Jesus prays. His prayer is simple and eloquent: "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me." Then he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" When he said this, the one who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go." Lazarus, too, experience death and resurrection. Dorcas and Lazarus were brought back from death for a time. But of course, both Dorcas and Lazarus died again. As the Bible teaches, "It is appointed unto man once to die." Every one of us will one day die and meet our Maker. It is inevitable. No matter what kind of person you are, no matter how you've lived, no matter what you believed, how much money you had, what religion you are, you are going to die. And this is why each one of us needs desperately to learn what the Bible teaches concerning death and resurrection.

Life and *death* are actually difficult to define, though easy to recognize. Even a child can tell the difference between a squirrel skittering up and down a tree from a squirrel dead and lying beside the road. The one is alive, seemingly excited about life, scampering up a tree when danger threatens, taunting his attacker that he has just foiled. The other is dead, unmoving, lifeless. Life is the quality that distinguishes a vital and functional being from a dead body. It is how we describe living organisms. Scientists tell us that living organisms undergo metabolism, grow, adapt to their environment, respond to stimuli, and reproduce. Nature confirms that. What is death? The permanent cessation of all vital functions: the end of life. When an organism has died, there is no bringing it back. If it were just sick, we might send for a veterinarian or a doctor. But if it is dead, it's time to call the road crew or the undertaker. Let us look together at several things that we can notice in our Scripture texts. First,

1. Death happens to all

We read of Dorcas that “This woman was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did. But it happened in those days that she became sick and died.” As we saw in a previous sermon, Dorcas was a godly woman. She had faith in Christ and was part of a Christian church in Lydda, about eight miles inland from Joppa, the only natural port on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Dorcas demonstrated her faith by good works. As we have seen, the biblical pattern is “by grace, through faith, unto good works” (Eph. 2:8–9). Salvation is by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Jesus is the God-man—God almighty come in human flesh. We cannot save ourselves because God’s standard is absolute perfection, and none of us measures up to that. So God sent Christ, his only-begotten Son. Through his mother Mary he obtained his humanity, but he did not inherit a sin nature through a human father. He was the perfect, sinless one, who died for others. “When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Since we could not save ourselves, God took the initiative. Christ died for the ungodly—the *undeserving*. If, knowing our need, we look to Christ in true faith, he will save us. As Paul put it, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” That is the gospel. Even a child can understand it. What God requires is a true faith—an acknowledgement that I cannot save myself, that I am utterly dependent upon the Lord Jesus Christ to save me. This is abasing to human pride. I can do nothing to save myself. What I do in my own strength is imperfect, done for my own glory rather than the glory of God; it doesn’t measure up to God’s perfect standard. But what I could not do, Christ has done. He is the Savior and sin-bearer. If I look to him in true faith, he will save me. “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Dorcas realized this. She professed faith in Christ and was received into the church in Lydda. But she did not stop there. She was “full of good works and charitable deeds which she did.” This

is an amazing statement. This is the only person in the entire Bible of whom this is said. Dorcas was full of good works and charitable deeds. She willingly did them. This was the proof that her faith was real, and that God had changed her heart. Dorcas is a living demonstration of the dictum “by grace, through faith, unto good works.” She proved that she had a true faith by the good works that she did. Like all of us, her works were imperfect. As Isaiah said, “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.” But good works, done in obedience to God’s word out of a heart of faith, are, through the mediation of Christ, accounted as righteous in the sight of a holy God. They are the fruit and evidence of a true and living faith. Dorcas’s good works were not forced. Nobody had to stand behind her with a whip to make her do them. She believed in Christ, she saw the needs of people around her, and she willingly and eagerly devoted herself to meet those needs.

So here was Dorcas, a good woman—the kind of person we would all love to have as a neighbor or fellow church member. But she died. “It happened in those days that she became sick and died.” Why did she die? It was not because God was displeased with her life. Because of sin, it is appointed unto men once to die. Men are allotted 70 or 80 years (Ps. 90). But God has his reasons for calling some to heaven before their time.

This past week one of our young men told me that the wife of his former pastor had died, leaving behind a husband and three teenage children. Here was a middle-age woman who had a family that needed her, a pastor-husband who needed her. Here are children who need a mother. Here is a teenage girl now deprived of the counsel and example of her mother; she has no mother she can go to when she needs advice. There will be no mother who can rejoice with her when it comes time for her wedding day. Cancer has claimed another victim. Here is a pastor whose ministry was helped invaluablely through the gift of a godly wife—someone whom he could confide in, someone who could help him through the demands of ministry, someone who could help him with hospitality, who could serve alongside the women of the church. Why did this lady die before her time, when my sister, brother-in-law and their family were praying that God would mercifully take their ailing loved one to heaven? Beloved, we do not know the answers to those questions now, but we can be absolutely convinced that our God is infinitely wise, that his ways are higher than our ways, and that he does all things well. As King Nebuchadnezzar once realized, “he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?” (Dan. 4:35).

Yes, dear hearer, death happens to all—the old, the young; the rich, the poor; the Christian, the non-Christian; the prepared and the unprepared. It is appointed unto men once to die, and it is our duty to prepare for it. Are you ready to die? Are

you ready to meet the Lord? I beg you, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. Second, notice from our text,

2. Care for the human corpse

Again, we read in our text, “It happened in those days that she became sick and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.” When Dorcas died, she did not die alone. The widows of the church were with her. They grieved. They missed their friend. They were profoundly shaken by her loss. Yet they were Christian people, and they displayed the love of Christ by caring for Dorcas’s remains. They treated her corpse with respect. They washed it and set it out to pay their last respects to it. And notice: the body was still Dorcas! It says, “when they had washed *her*.” Now death is separation. Physical death is separation of the human soul or spirit from the body. Eternal death is separation of the soul or spirit from the comfortable presence of the living God, to be sent into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth forever and ever.

But after Dorcas became sick and died, the surviving widows “washed her”—that is, washed her body, and laid her body in an upper room. That upper room was the first-century equivalent of the funeral parlor. The body was laid out so those who remained could come pay their respects and grieve together.

Dorcas’s body was not thrown out in the trash. It was not taken and unceremoniously dumped in a landfill. It certainly was not mutilated or dismembered or butchered or abused. It was not cannibalized. Why? Because the early Christians believed that man (a biblical category which included woman) was created in the very image of God. Out of all the creatures, only man was formed after God’s likeness and has the capacity for a relationship with the living God.

Dear one, do *you* have a relationship with God? You were created to have fellowship with God. As the Catechism observes, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The toys and pleasures of this world are only temporary. The “pleasures of sin for a season” eventually come to an end. It is appointed unto man once to die. At the end, our family and friends will all die, and we will be left alone. A husband and wife who once said, “I love you, I commit myself to you, I will always be there for you” will themselves die. None of us knows who will go first. Children usually bury their parents, but sometimes parents bury their children. God alone knows the day of our death, and as Christians we can have the assurance that God will not let us be tempted beyond our ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that we may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Death is inevitable, and as Christians we are wise to prepare for it—to have our house in order, to have a financial plan in place, to draw up a will, to buy life insurance, to make funeral arrangements, to purchase burial plots, etc. But just as the women of the church lovingly washed Dorcas’s corpse and prepared it for the

congregation to come in and pay their last respects, we too should care for the bodies of the deceased. When our spirit departs from us, our body will still be “us.” It will not be nondescript, it will not be undifferentiated matter. The Shorter Catechism, Q. 37, asks, “What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection” (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 970).

The early church believed that the bodies of deceased believers were still united to Christ, so they treated corpses with care. Just as Joseph of Arimathea did a good work by taking down the crucified body of Jesus from the cross and lovingly placing it in his own tomb, newly hewn out of solid rock, so the widows of Lydda did a good work by lovingly preparing the body of Dorcas for Christian burial. Thirdly, observe,

3. Hope of the resurrection

In verses 39–40 we read that the apostle Peter, having been fetched from Joppa (modern Yafo), went up to the upper room and assessed the situation. He heard the testimony of the widows who were the beneficiaries of Dorcas’s good works. Then, as our Lord had done before, when he asked all the mourners to leave before raising the daughter of the synagogue ruler from the dead, Peter did likewise. Jesus had put out all the mourners, perhaps because some of them were ridiculing him for saying, “The child is not dead, but sleeping.” Then, when everyone except the little girl’s father and mother had departed, “He took the child by the hand, and said to her, ‘*Talitha, cumi*,’ which is translated, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise.’ Immediately the girl arose and walked, for she was twelve years of age” (Mark 5:41). Oh, the power of Christ!

So, in the present case, Peter put out of the room all the mourners, knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.”

Note: Peter didn’t do this in his own strength. First, he prayed. *Prayer* means to address God with adoration, confession, supplication or thanksgiving. In the words of our Catechism, “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.” Why did Peter pray? Because he knew he could not raise Dorcas from the dead by his own power. God alone is the Lord and giver of life; God alone could raise her. And so as his Lord before had said (in the Aramaic language of ancient Israel), “Little girl, arise,” now Peter, after his prayer, speaks to Dorcas and (using her Aramaic name) says, “‘Tabitha, arise.’ And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up”—truly an amazing miracle performed by the power of Christ!

Why did Peter do this? It was important to show, at that time before the completion of the Holy Scriptures, that the ascended Christ still had the power of

life and death, still had the power to raise the dead. Brothers and sisters, this is for us as well. Your Lord, who is the way, the truth and the *life*, still has the power to give life. As he spoke in John, “For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

As Job professed, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and *my* eyes shall behold, and not another.”

As I mentioned a few moments ago, the wife of one of our young men’s former pastor died, leaving behind a husband and three teenage children. When he told me, the two of us prayed for the family. I later wrote the pastor a note, using words reminiscent of our Old Testament text: “May the God of all comfort comfort you, dear brother! How thankful to know that our Redeemer lives, and that we who have fled to him for salvation will see him face-to-face at the latter day, when there will be no more death, nor sorrow, nor any more pain.”

Here at the foot of the cross there is real comfort! Christian, your Savior Jesus has conquered death. He says, “Because I live, ye shall live also.” What kind of comfort does the world offer? “You’re in our thoughts at this difficult time.” “We’re pulling for you, friend.” Your loved one is probably up there having a beer with his buddies in the afterlife.” Or the one on the display commemorating the deceased members of my high school graduating class: “Never forgotten.” How is that a comfort to a grieving family member? We all know that plenty of people who have died have been forgotten? Who knows the name of the unknown soldier? What about a badly decomposed body that has washed ashore? Adolph Hitler, Lee Harvey Oswald and Osama Bin Laden have not been forgotten; is that a comfort to their families?

Only in the gospel is there real comfort. The Bible tells us that every single human being was fashioned by the God of heaven for a purpose, that every life has meaning. Out of all the creatures, only man was made in the image of God, made to have a relationship with God. The whole human race fell in our forefather Adam. “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.” All those who look to Jesus in true faith are redeemed

For the Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. For the Christian, to die in Christ is far better than physical life. The apostle Paul said, “I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.” “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” For the

Christian, death is like falling asleep. The apostle Paul speaks of those who have “fallen asleep in Christ.” A healthy person falls asleep at night and wakes up refreshed in the morning. In the same way, for the Christian, to die is to fall asleep in this life and wake up in the next in the arms of Christ. The Christian is secure in Christ. He says, “I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish.” When a Christian dies, the church grieves. We sorrow. But we do not sorrow as those who have no hope. Our sorrow is temporary. Ultimately, our sorrow shall be turned into joy—joy in the presence of him who loved us and gave himself for us. At the final day all the redeemed shall gather in the presence of the Lamb who was slain, to sing his praises and rejoice before him. There will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain. The Christian’s joy will be complete. We will look into the face of our Savior, and all will be well.

In a few moments we will sing the prayer of Martin Luther, “Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word; curb those who by deceit or sword would wrest the kingdom from your Son and bring to naught all he has done. Lord Jesus Christ, your power make known, for you are Lord of lords alone; defend your holy church, that we may sing your praise triumphantly. O Comforter of priceless worth, send peace and unity on earth; support us in our final strife, and lead us out of death to life.”¹ This beautiful prayer is steeped in Scripture. It calls upon the Sovereign Lord Jesus Christ to support and defend his church and lead us into triumph in the gospel. The last line is particularly appropriate to today’s sermon: “support us in our final strife, and lead us out of death to life.” The believer’s “final strife” is death. Only in Christ do we have someone capable of leading us “out of death to life.” Amen.

¹ *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 412