

Never Alone

Psalm 23, John 11:1–44

This past Friday I conducted a funeral for a former neighbor of ours. She was not a church attender. At dinner the other day one of my daughters asked what I was going to say at the funeral. Her husband immediately piped up: “Preach the gospel.” That, of course, had been my intent when I wrote the sermon.

It occurred to me that others in our congregation might wonder the same thing. What does a faithful pastor say at the funeral of a deceased person who did not profess Christ? My sermon the other day turned out especially well, and I thought it would be both edifying and instructive to share it with you. I will present it slightly edited, then make some applications for our congregation. Here’s how I began:

My name is Pastor Pribble. My wife and I were neighbors of our friend from the time we moved to Lansing, 35 years ago this week. I am a minister of Christ. My ultimate loyalty is to the Lord Jesus Christ. I promise to tell you the truth. Some of the things I will say today will be comforting, some will be disturbing. But my job as a minister of Christ is to tell you the truth. There is no point in sugarcoating and evasion. The stakes are too high.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the *truth* and the life.” He claimed to be the very embodiment of truth. Why should you believe Jesus? One reason: he rose from the dead. He publicly announced that he and his disciples were going up to Jerusalem, that he would be betrayed into the hands of the religious leaders, that they would condemn him to death, he would be crucified, and the third day he would rise again.¹ The historical record verifies that he was right. Jesus is the only man in history who rose from the dead, never to die again. The truth is that all of us are going to die. There is no way that we can escape this. The Bible says, “It is appointed to men once to die.” Experience confirms this. Everyone dies.

It is not pleasant to think about death. We can choose not to think about it, and be unprepared, or we can face reality and think about it, and be prepared.

The dear departed was our neighbor. We knew her for many years. She and her family lived in our neighborhood for about five years before we arrived. As time went on, we got to know them. When we walked by their house, and they were sitting on their front porch, we would stop to talk. Norma would sometimes visit when I was busy. Their house was a gathering place: people and cars were constantly coming and going. We would keep up with changes in the family: new boyfriends, children and grandchildren. The family moved out a couple years ago.

This past Monday one of the daughters stopped by our house to tell us that her mother had died. Death is always sad, but this death was especially so, because the

¹ Matt. 20:19

deceased died alone. She and her husband had separated, and she lived in a small apartment.

Many people have a romantic view of death: desiring to die in their own home, surrounded by loving family. In our former neighbor's case, she died alone. A family member talked to her a week ago Friday and found out she wasn't feeling well. Shortly thereafter she stopped answering her phone. The police were called, and when the apartment was unlocked, she was found sitting in her living room, dead. This was understandably a shock to the family. It was not what anyone had hoped for.

In the book of Genesis, chapter 39, the patriarch Jacob died in his own bed, surrounded by his twelve sons and grandchildren. He spoke personally to them all, telling them in exquisite poetic language what was going to happen to each of their families after his decease, giving each son a blessing. From one of his sons would come the long-promised Messiah. After he finished blessing his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed and "yielded up the ghost"—that is, took his last breath. Jacob died at home, surrounded by family. Among his last words was the exclamation "I have waited for your salvation, O LORD!"² In faith he was looking for the coming of Christ. The book of Hebrews confirms that Jacob "died in faith." What an ideal way to die!

Life is a gift from God. *God* is the Lord and giver of life. The ability to breathe, to think, to understand, is a gift from God. All of us are allotted a finite number of days. All of us will die. Man knows not his time.

When Adam and Eve, our first parents, sinned, they brought death upon the human and race: "In Adam all die."³

Death was certainly not unknown in Old Testament times. In Psalm 23, David sings, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." David knew that one day he would die. But, believing God's promise, he knew that he would not face death alone. He knew that whether or not his family would be there at the moment of his death, God would be with him. At the close of the Psalm he says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the *house* of the LORD for ever." Even in eternity he would not be alone.

Humans were created to be a sociable people. We were not created to be isolated, living life solely for ourselves, thinking only of our own individual affairs, succeeding sometimes, failing sometimes, with no purpose in life other than to eat, drink, sleep, get up, work, play, consume; living self-absorbed lives, never understanding our ultimate destiny.

² Gen. 49:18

³ 1 Cor. 15:22

In the gospel of John we are introduced to a man and his two sisters who were special friends of Jesus. Jesus would spend time with them when he came to their town, Bethany. One day, when he was away, he tells his disciples that his friend Lazarus had died. Jesus and his disciples were out of town at that time, and by the time he got to Bethany he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. The sisters were understandably grief-stricken. When they and the other mourners stood before the tomb we read the poignant two-word sentence, “Jesus wept.”⁴ That statement holds a world of meaning because it shows that the Son of God relates to us on an emotional level. He who is the second person of the holy Trinity became man and entered into our life-experience and shared our sorrows. He who is the Lord and giver of life became *death* for us, so that we could experience eternal life.

Lazarus’ body was buried in a cave, with a large stone covering the entrance. Jesus commanded: “Roll the stone away!” Martha, the sister of the deceased, was shocked. She said, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.”

Jesus prayed with audible words. He thanked the Father that he always hears him. Then he spoke in a loud voice and said, “Lazarus, come out!” The man who had been dead four days came out of his tomb, his hands and feet bound with the long strips of linen that beloved dead were buried in at the time. As he moved forward with difficulty, his legs bound with strips of linen and his face still wrapped with a burial cloth, Jesus said to those who stood by, “Loose him, and let him go.” Lazarus was restored alive to his beloved sisters. Shockingly, the proud religious leaders in Jerusalem plotted to *kill* Lazarus, because on account of him, so many people began following Jesus.

The raising of Lazarus shows Jesus’ power over death. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in me shall never die.” No mere human can speak this way. God alone holds power over life and death.

If Jesus is who he says he is, then the most important thing in the world is to become his follower—far more important than being popular, than winning the lottery, than experiencing momentary pleasure.

I guarantee that our dear departed friend and relative at this moment would want the good news of Christ to be clearly explained to you, her friends and loved ones, so that you all would clearly understand how to get to heaven. You must become Christ’s follower. This is the most important thing in the world.

There is a story in the Bible that pulls back the curtain on what happens after death. There was a poor beggar, Lazarus. He ate the crumbs that fell from a rich man’s table. One day Lazarus died and was carried by the angels into paradise. The

⁴ John 11:35

rich man also died, and he received an elaborate burial. Yet his soul awoke in a place of torment and anguish. He called out to Father Abraham, begging that he would send Lazarus to earth to warn his five brothers, so that they could escape the fires of hell. The rich man, suffering the horrors of hell, wanted his family and friends to hear the truth at his funeral.

Is our beloved one in heaven? Man cannot declare with certainty. God alone knows the human heart. We are told that she had a Bible, and that she had more peace the last couple years. That is hopeful.

Today, dear friends and family, my responsibility is to tell you the truth. God sent his Son, the Lord Jesus, to die for our sins, wrongdoings and failures, that by believing in him and becoming his devoted worshippers we might experience eternal life with him. I beg you to follow Christ and become part of a faithful church!

You can dismiss what I say as pure fantasy if you are absolutely sure that Christ was *not* sent by God, that he was just an ordinary man, that he was a fraud, a liar and a deceiver, that he did *not* rise from the dead, that the multiple witnesses who went to their death rather than deny that he had risen and had appeared to them and been seen by them were all liars, that his physical body still lies in a tomb somewhere, turned to dust—if you are absolutely right in all these suppositions, then and only then can you safely dismiss Christ. If you are right, then there is no God, this life is all there is, there is no afterlife, there is no absolute right or wrong, it's every man for himself, we must all make our own meaning; life is ultimately pointless. If all these assumptions are absolutely true without a doubt, then, and only then, can you reject Christ. You will have proven that Christians are fools, deceivers, nags, deluded.

I beg you today—and I believe our dear departed would beg you today: come to Christ. If you come to him you will never be alone. He will be with you in life and death. The testimony of David will be yours: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

You will find a faithful church that preaches salvation in Christ alone. You will be surrounded by people who love the Lord. You will be spiritually fed by God's word. If I can help you follow Christ, feel free to give me a call.

Jesus said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”⁵ Those who are Christ's will never be alone. Amen.

Such, then, was the sermon that I preached two days ago at the funeral of a woman who was not a church attender. Within the limited scope of a funeral

⁵ Heb. 13:5

message, I preached the gospel. I stated that life is a gift from God, that we will all die, that salvation is in Christ alone, that Jesus has power over death, that the one who believes in him will never die, that you must become Christ's follower; that is the most important thing in the world; that to die without Christ is eternal torment; that God sent his Son, the Lord Jesus, to die for our sins and wrongdoings and failures, that by believing in him and becoming his devoted worshippers we might experience eternal life with him. I closed by inviting my hearers, "Come to Christ."

Let us draw two applications from my funeral sermon. First,

1. Funerals are excellent opportunities to share Christ.

Over the years I have preached at funeral services for strong, faithful believers, I have preached at funeral services of those who said they were Christians but were not part of a church, and I have preached at funeral services of those who never professed Christ and had no connection with the church. For ten years I was a volunteer hospice chaplain, and I had opportunities to conduct funerals for people, some of whom I barely knew. I have never turned down an invitation to conduct a funeral.

Not only do I preach at funerals, I also attend them. I have attended funerals where the minister brazenly asserted that *everyone* goes to heaven. This is totally contrary to Scripture and a misrepresentation of the gospel. It is the error of universalism, that it is God's intention to save everyone, including those who reject Christ. It is a denial of our Lord's express teaching that "he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:15).

If your friend or loved one dies suddenly, and you want me to lead their funeral, I will do that. Why? People who would never come to a church service will go to a funeral. Their hearts are tender. They have been forcefully reminded about the shortness of life. The Holy Spirit of God can change the most hardened heart. Just think of how bitterly the apostle Paul hated Christ and the church before the Lord confronted him on the road to Damascus. If you or I had seen him back then, we would have agreed that this was the most unlikely candidate to come to Christ: "Saul of Tarsus a preacher of the gospel? No way!" But Psalm 110 says, "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power." What a precious truth! The Spirit of God can convert a person, open the eyes of his understanding and make him receptive to the truth. He does this, without violating our natural free will, through the miracle of regeneration, removing our natural spiritual blindness and giving us a heart to know him, so that we come most willingly. No one is beyond the saving power of the Holy Spirit of God.

One does not have to be an ordained minister to conduct a funeral. There are a lot of funerals being conducted by people with all kinds of screwy views. There is a lot of false doctrine being disseminated at funerals. Why should not people hear the truth, as well?

For ordinary believers there are opportunities to share Christ when people are grieving. The Bible teaches, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”⁶ If you come alongside a grieving friend and try to minister, that glorifies God. A grieving friend might be open to receiving a thoughtfully written and tactful condolence card, along with a gospel tract. To offer such is an expression of our common humanity, an attempt to weep with those who weep. Every person is made in the image of God, worthy to be treated with dignity and respect. Funerals are excellent opportunities to share Christ, and committed Christians do well to take advantage of such opportunities. Secondly, remember that

2. Christ can save a sinner at the last minute.

In the funeral sermon I preached last Friday I briefly reflected on the spiritual state of the deceased, since that would be of immediate interest to my audience. She was baptized as an infant but left the church and made no profession of faith. She loved her family but made no claim to love God. Does that prove that she was not saved? No, for she could have come to Christ in her last moments of life. Did the Spirit of God convert her on her deathbed? That is a mystery that will not be fully known until the day when faith shall be made sight, when we see our blessed Lord in glory. It is possible that the Lord converted her in her last moments. He has the power to do that. To those of you who have never committed your life to Christ, it is possible that the Lord will convert you on your deathbed, that his Holy Spirit will regenerate you, and you will be born again. Should that happen, it will suddenly become clear that you are a sinner, that Christ died to save you, and that you earnestly want him to save you. But in your weakened physical state, as life is ebbing out of you and you are departing this world into the next, you might not be able to profess your faith. Perhaps you will be all alone with no one with you to whom you can say, “I now believe in Jesus.”

We know that Christ is able to save an undeserving sinner at the end of life. A man right after the funeral the other day brought up the story of the thief on the cross. I replied, “I’m so glad that story is in the Bible—so *very* glad!” In Luke 23 we read: “Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, ‘If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.’ But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.’” Here is a man being crucified with Jesus. His life is ebbing out of him. With the weight of his body hanging from his upper arms, and

⁶ Rom. 12:15

with the extreme pain radiating from his feet, nailed as they were in an unnatural position, unable to support his body, it would have been extremely hard for him to catch his breath. With great effort he speaks to rebuke his fellow criminal who is hurling insults at Jesus. He testifies that Jesus has done nothing wrong. Then he speaks to Jesus, calling him Lord, and asking him to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. At this, Jesus assures him that that very day he would be with him in paradise. Here a testimony from the lips of the Lord himself that a poor, dying sinner is *saved*—one of the elect, an object of mercy! Christ is able to save an undeserving sinner as he is departing this life. But why wait till the last minute? Confess Christ now, while you have your full physical and mental capacities. Then, when you die, there will be no question whether you were a follower of Christ.

Indeed, Christ is the Savior of sinners. He is Lord of life and death. He is able to save to the uttermost those who look to him in faith. He is able to save dying sinners. To him be all glory. Amen.