

Freedom Series

4. Freedom from Fear: fear of death (2 Cor 4:8-5:9)

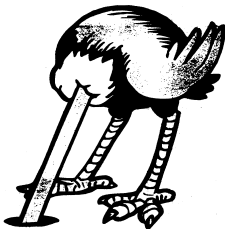
He's passed on. He's with the Lord. She's gone to a better place. She plays the harp now. He's snuffed it. These are all nice or less than nice ways of avoiding the words. He's died. She's died. People have different ways of expressing death because it's a subject that many of us find difficult.

There is a story of a US Senator Jacob Javits who left the USA to visit England. A constituent happened to be in Washington, D.C., and decided to stop in and see his senator. He found Javits' office, introduced himself, and asked to see the senator. "I'm sorry," said the secretary, "but Senator Javits has gone to the United Kingdom." "Oh, my goodness!" exclaimed the visitor, clearly taken aback. "Is it too late to send flowers?"

It is always dangerous ground to tread when you put in something amusing in a sermon about death. It's dangerous ground because to those who have lost a loved one recently will feel hurt possibly. I count myself amongst those who have lost loved ones and it can be a difficult experience. It's true that as time heals we start to remember the happy times we had with them.

But for most people in our modern age, death is feared. It's a taboo subject. People rarely ever voice their fears. They are rarely discussed. For the young, it is a problem they don't like to think about - but maybe they will think about it later. Remember the fridge sticker last week - why wait until the eleventh hour when you may die at 10-30? Many clam up when the matter is discussed. Death engenders fear. It's a great unknown, like being afraid of the dark.

So what happens? People seek immortality or at least to live as long as they can. The rich even get their bodies frozen in the hope that someone may be able to thaw them out and bring them back to life. That's the trouble with life - it's a disease that is 100% fatal. We can't escape it. We can't get away from it. Beyond this life there is no hope for a huge majority of people on this planet.



For your average person in Swaffham - this is their attitude to death. Head in the sand.

As I said last week, we live in a society that has departed from God and therefore we are a nation without hope.

Is that you this morning, without hope? You're living in fear of what lies beyond the grave? Or maybe your head is stuck in the sand. Then you need to know Jesus because you have much to fear beyond

Over 1300 years ago in the portion of pagan England called Northumbria, the first Christian missionaries arrived. They came to the courts of King Edwin of Northumbria, and in his great hall ablaze with the light of many torches these Christian missionaries gave their first sermon on the Christian faith. When they had finished, one old chieftain asked - "Can this new religion tell us anything of what happens after death? The soul of man is like a sparrow flying through this lighted hall. It enters at one door from the darkness outside, flits through the light and warmth, and passes out into the dark again. Can your new religion solve for us the mystery?"

We aren't told the answer but I think it may well have been "yes". It must have worked because the gospel spread like wildfire in Northumbria.

If it had been me I would have said "Did you know that the Bible was written that you may KNOW you have eternal life." God wants you have eternal life and to be sure you have it..

When John Owen, the great Puritan, lay on his deathbed his secretary wrote (in his name) to a friend, "I am still in the land of the living." "Stop," said Owen. "Change that and say, I am yet in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living."

What a bold thing to say. For Christians, eternal life is the land of the living. Let's have a look at what Paul said:

2 Cor 5:2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, 3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Paul was groaning, longing to be clothed in his heavenly dwelling. Is that something that's your expectation? Or do you have no hope? God wants you to have that hope this morning. What separates you from God and that hope has been your own unbelief and sin against God in the past even though He created you and is the source of your life.

Because of that God has every right to reject you and judge you. But no. God is a God of love - not desiring that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. Repentance means turning around, admitting you are a sinner, accepting God's forgiveness through Jesus' death on the cross and accepting His gift of eternal life. Yes eternal life isn't earned - it's given to all those who receive it and desire to walk God's way. That's God's promise, God's hope of eternal life.

The trouble is that Christians often fall into the trap that the world and the enemy drags us into. It's a trap of doubt of making us unsure of where we are.

One of the most basic parts of Sharing Jesus was a fundamental question. If you were to die tonight would you be sure you were going to heaven? Are you sure? Many Christians we ask this question to are not. They may have accepted Christ - but ask them about death and they are unsure.

Do you go through periods when your faith is in crisis? When you become unsure of what you believe, particularly after death. We all worry or have worried about death at sometime don't we? And what do we think? Usually it is somewhere around worrying that if we were to suddenly die, would we be sure that we were going to heaven?

This does happen to Christians and often at critical points in life - maybe the loss of a loved one or as they pass through a period of illness. They then get guilt feelings about it and never resolve the fears but drop it to the back of their mind. We look at our sin and our lack of faith sometimes and we wonder whether we are saved? Was it all an illusion. Are we right to believe this?

That's another way we get bound. By our won guilt, shame, doubt. God wants us to be free from that doubt in our mind this morning. We are God's people so why should we live in fear, doubt or guilt?

So how can we be SURE we are going to heaven. Paul helps us three ways in this passage.

■ **Jesus has conquered death**

Why do we know that the promises of God about eternal life are true? How do we know that in Jesus we can have that gift of eternal life and an assurance that we are saved? Because one man has conquered death. He's come back alive and can tell us all about it.

2 Cor 4:13 "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. 15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

This was important to the Corinthians. If you look in 1 Corinthians 15 (or for that matter in both letter to the Thessalonians, there was an expectancy that Jesus would return). But their friends were dying and they were finding this a problem - it worried them. It shouldn't have if they read 1 Corinthians. In Christ we see the promise of life. I remember my mother's funeral last year. The guys at the church were very sombre - anybody would think someone had died. At the graveside I had to remind them that the grave would be shut temporarily because one day it would be opened again - because we have the promise of being raised again - and the model is Jesus! These are the promises of God. Hallelujah! Don't look at the graves of your loved ones as the end. That's why we say they are resting - when you take a rest you plan to go further. We are going further! How do we know - because Jesus was killed and then was raised to life. In Colossians Paul calls Him the firstborn from the dead. Why? Because He is the first raised to life eternal and we are to follow.

That single act of resurrection changes everything.

How do we know about life after death? Because Jesus came back to tell us about it.

How do we know that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. Because Jesus came back to tell us about it.

It's a pity so few people were there on Easter Sunday evening. Because the resurrection of Jesus is one of the most attested facts of history. By that fact we know that the faith we have on the basis of His risen life is also true.

■ **We have the Holy Spirit**

Christianity is not a faith of books or a faith of facts. It's a dynamic relationship with a living God.

2 Cor 5:5 Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. 6 Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. 7 We live by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

We've come across these words before. The Holy Spirit is a deposit - a guarantee that what God is said is true. We are always confident - because we have the Holy Spirit. We would prefer to be with the Lord - because the Holy Spirit helps us understand the wonders of the presence of God and we want more of Him.

Why do we have doubts about our faith? Why do we have problems of assurance? You have the promises. You are sealed with the Holy Spirit. Maybe your problem is one of relationship. Draw close to Him this morning and know His closeness again. Bring your doubts and fears before Him. You can. Remember our first week in this series - there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. So bring your fears about death before Him and ask for His peace and assurance afresh this morning.

■ **We walk by faith and not by sight**

We live by faith and not by sight. How do I know I'm going to heaven. I can't see it I only have the testimony of Jesus and the witness of the Holy Spirit. Now these are good enough for me. But what about you? I can understand if you are reticent. People walk by sight. By what they can see and can analyse.

If you are a Christian you are being asked to walk and live another way - by faith and not by sight. Now remember that in the Bible faith is a certainty of mind upon which you base your actions. It's not the way that the world works.

I've often said that God works the "wrong way around". Well, it's not God that's the wrong way around - it's us. We desire to have everything on a plate and when we have it then we move with it.

God says, trust My word, whether you have any human grounds to or not. That's hard - I know - I've done it and many of you have done it too. But when we have made the step of faith - when we have walked by faith then God brings the blessing which proves the call.

That's what we are being asked to do about death. To take God at His word and start to live as though we are children of God with a home in heaven laid up.

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 1 Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

Trust God and take Him at His word this morning - walk by faith and not by sight

Do you have assurance of salvation this morning. Are you sure if you were to die tonight that you would go to heaven?

If you've accepted Christ and you lack assurance, don't panic because we all go through periods of doubt and guilt in our lives. God wants you to accept His promises by faith. Remember, you are a child of God. That's a promise, that's a relationship. Bring your doubts and fears before Him this morning. There is no condemnation, only a loving Father who desires you have that complete assurance, a Son who rose again and ever lives to make intercession for you and a Holy Spirit who lives in you and who intercedes for you with groanings that can't be uttered. Take confidence in that! God wants you to be sure you are His. The fact is if you are a believer already, you are His - and that's the rock solid promise of God and it can't be taken away from you. But God wants you to feel like as though you are saved. Jesus is risen. You shall rise. Listen to the voice of His Spirit in your life.

Perhaps your answer is no because you have never accepted Christ. You are worried about death because you've nothing to hope for. If that's the case the time has come to accept Jesus into your life this morning as Saviour and Lord. Because He wants to know you and maybe today's the day when you need to face up to your own mortality and realise that God wants you to spend eternity with Him. The decision is yours. Come this morning. Jesus has died for your sins so accept God's forgiveness, turn to Him and receive His gift of eternal life.



*Preached at Swaffham Baptist Church 30/6/03
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