

Free from Fear of Death

Hebrews 2:14-15

Turn to Hebrews 2. Did you know that I am dying? I am dying. You can see it for yourselves. My hair is turning grey, has been for several years, and getting thin on top. They say that's a sign of old age. It is not a sign of old age. It is a sign of death.

When I was younger I could run 3 miles in 6 minutes a mile. Now on a good day I might do it in 9 minutes a mile, probably closer to ten. You will say, 'what do you expect? You're getting older.' No, I'm not getting older. I'm dying. Death is where we're going. "Old" is just a town we pass through on the way.

If someone had an illness that would kill them in six months, and another person had an illness that would kill them in two years, we'd probably feel pretty sorry for both of them. One's a little better off than the other, but not much. People, we all have this.

Is my dying bad news? It gets worse. You are dying, too. Every one of you. Wake up, folks. We all have this sickness. The disease is called "sin," and it leads to death. You've got it, and I've got it, and the clock is ticking.

But God has acted. God got involved.

Hebrews 2:14-15 – Freed from Fear of Death - *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

These two verses are all one sentence, but there is a lot in here. Let's start with the last line: *free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

The human problem here is not that we will die, or even that we fear death, but that the fear of dying makes us slaves. That slavery is the problem. Being afraid to die makes us slaves. It makes us do what we don't want, and can't do what we do want.

We can understand that we will die, and that we're afraid of dying, but this Scripture says the fear makes us live one way and not another, the fear makes us slaves, and that slavery is the problem.

And the fear does not start when we're old or sick. It lasts our whole lives: *free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

In the picture our text creates, the devil, Satan, uses this fear like a whip or a big club. Satan does not decide when a person will die. That has always been God's business.

But Satan can throw that fear at us, and he uses the fear as his club. He tells us what to do, and if we don't he fills us with the terror of death. That fear is his power, and that fear is our slavery. His power and our slavery are much the same thing.

His power is his ability use the fear of death to make us obey him. Our slavery is that we are afraid to die. We don't experience life like this.

We persuade ourselves that our death is far away, we don't need to worry about dying, and so we don't feel the fear and don't know that we're slaves. But, people, that does not mean this Scripture is wrong. Every once in a while something makes us feel like we could be dying, and that is a remarkably unpleasant experience. That's called fear.

The devil's power is to fill us with the fear of dying, and our slavery is our fear of dying. This Scripture teaches us that Jesus the Son of God became human to rescue us from exactly this problem. He became human, and as a human he died. Listen again:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

This Scripture teaches that we are freed from the fear of death. We don't have to be afraid of dying anymore. Jesus has done something about death so that we don't need to be afraid anymore. God has acted so that death is no longer frightening.

This is remarkable, astonishing. A month ago I taught the book of Hebrews in a one week course. I have taught Hebrews at least six times over the years, but this time through our text today grabbed by attention like never before, thus this sermon.

God says to us through this Scripture: **I changed death, so that you have no reason to fear it any more. It is not frightening anymore. You don't need to be afraid of dying. My Son became human and died for just this: to free you from that fear.**

The Christian Hope: the Two Resurrections (see Rev 20:5-6)

Our freedom from the fear of dying has two parts. But first, understand that the Christian answer to the death problem is different than the world around us.

The only answer the world has to dying is to make this life last longer. The world cannot offer eternal life, but it does all it can to make this life last as long as possible.

We who are God's children have an entirely different response to death. Because of Jesus we can go through death and it is not a problem. The Scriptures tell us that we don't need to fear death.

The answer part 1, 1st resurrection, is that as soon as the body dies we are with the Lord Jesus. Answer part 2, 2nd resurrection: our bodies will die and then be raised again.

Paul was in prison and facing trial. The charge will have been something like treason. That is, the gospel Paul preached was a message against the government of Rome. If found innocent he would be freed; if found guilty he would be executed.

Listen as he thinks aloud about which would be better: *If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.* (Philippians 1:22-24)

There was very little fear of dying in Paul. Living scared him more than dying. All things considered, to die and leave his body and be with Christ was better by far.

That's what Jesus did for us by dying, that's the freedom from fear of death the Hebrews 2 describes. As soon as we die, we are with the Lord, and it is better than this.

In that Scripture, Philippians 1, Paul speaks only about himself. In 2 Corinthians 5 he uses the same kind of language to describe the normal faith of God's children. He uses "we" to describe what all of us believe.

2 Corinthians 5:6-8 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 For 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.

As soon as our body dies, we are with the Lord. We are always confident about this. We are not only confident, but we would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. "At home" – did you get that? The body is a home, and the Lord is a different home, a better home.

Let's personalize this. I'll read it as "I" am always confident rather than "we." You make this your testimony. *Therefore I am always confident and know that as long as I am at home in my body, I am away from the Lord. ⁷ For I live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ I am confident, I say, and I would prefer to be away from my body and at home with the Lord.*

That's the first part of our hope as followers of Christ, what Rev 20 calls the first resurrection. The second part is that our bodies will be raised back to life. We will eventually have both homes again, the body home and also home with the Lord.

Jesus empty tomb on that first Easter Sunday is not just the first hint that Jesus had risen. The empty tomb tells us something important about our resurrection. That body that the risen Jesus had was the same body as was whipped and crucified and died.

It was changed, it would never die again, but it was not a new body. It was the old body brought back and changed. Being away from the body home and at home with the Lord is a temporary state. It lasts from our death until the Lord returns to earth.

That is the Christian hope. The world wants to make this life last as long as possible. That's the pagan hope, and it is not much of a hope.

The Christian hope is that to be away from the body home is to be at home with the Lord, which describes what happens as soon as we die. And when the Lord returns our bodies are raised to be far better than now, and we will live forever in our new body home and also with the Lord.

The Denial of Death - A friend of mine gave me this book to read when I was in my late 20s, and it affected me deeply. *The Denial of Death* is the title of the book, written in the early 1970s. A few years later it received a Pulitzer prize for excellent research.

The writer was Ernest Becker. His main point is that death is not simply one more human problem. Death is our central problem, the overwhelming human problem.

We spend our whole lives distracting ourselves from death, telling ourselves it is far away, that we don't have to think about it, pretending that it's not coming at all. In short, we spend our whole lives denying that we will die.

The book does not provide any solution. He's not a Christian. He simply gives evidence that in fact we built our lives around avoiding death. It seemed to me a profoundly Christian book, because life and death are dominant right from the Garden of Eden. (I heard that later in life, Becker did put his trust in Christ.)

Here are a few reasons why I think he's right, that we are busy denying death. One, the elderly are surprised when their bodies fail them.

I worked at a nursing home for six years. I remember two different men in their 80s who were unhappily surprised that their bodies were deteriorating badly. They spoke like they had gone to sleep when they were 40 and healthy, and woke up the next day being 80 and dying. They were surprised.

When young people hear the elderly talk like that, the young people say to themselves, "what did they expect? They are old, they should expect this, they've been living in denial." That's what the young people say.

But the young people are no different. The young live in denial as well, and the young people who say that will be just as surprised when they are old and their bodies fail.

Another reason I think we all deny death is that we are not supposed to talk about this topic. There is some unspoken rule to avoid the topic.

Even if in this sermon I am teaching good news about the fear of death, lots of good news, there is still a voice inside me saying, "Yes, but why do you need to talk about death at all? We are still alive. Why do we need to talk about dying?" I'll bet some of you have felt that. We are living in denial of the problem.

Another reason that I think we live in denial of death is that the New Testament speaks a lot more about life and about the answer to the death problem than we do.

The evangelical gospel has tunnel vision. We see only that sin makes us guilty and Jesus rescues us from the guilt. It is true that we are guilty of sin and that Jesus rescues us. It is not true that that is the center of the New Testament gospel.

We encourage ourselves about troubles and God's presence and his faithfulness, but we don't talk about death very much. I read the NT through, not very fast, but I've been doing it a long time, and have come to realize it says more this than we do.

Here's one example of our tunnel vision, and about Jesus being the answer to the death problem. The book of Acts records quite a few evangelistic preaching, people preaching to unbelievers and telling them the good news of Jesus.

I went through the gospel sermons of Acts and looked for two topics. One, the resurrection of Jesus, and two, the forgiveness of sins. In each sermon I counted how many lines were about sin and forgiveness, and how many were about the resurrection of Jesus. I've done this before, and did it again as part of preparing this sermon.

A solid three times as much about the resurrection of Jesus, in Acts preaching, as about the forgiveness of sins. The world does not know it has a sin problem, although it does have a sin problem. But the whole world knows it has a death problem.

The difference between what we teach each other, and what the NT says, tells me we are avoiding the death problem, we're missing it. If this sermon does not reach us, if it does not reach me, it will be because we'd just rather not think about death at all.

Funerals – We do get it right at funerals. Christian funerals are wonderful. This hope comes alive there. I have been at two funerals that did not even pretend to be Christian.

One was a man from a family that had no God at all, no faith, no concern for anything beyond what we see. That was a dark funeral, despairing, hopeless, black.

The other was a funeral of a different faith. The people were determined to make the funeral positive, a celebration of a good person. But their hope was so feeble, no hope at all, the person was just gone, but she was good so let's be happy.

You have to go to completely non-Christian funerals as well as Christian funerals to appreciate what Christ has brought us. There is no comparison.

Camping story about fear

I went on a hiking trip with two friends, the Mantario trail, a four day hiking trip in the Whiteshell Park. We camped by a lake the first night out, and there were a couple guys who had started at the other end and were just finishing their hike.

One of them told us that there was a deep creek at the other end, like a small river, no bridge, very hard to cross, had to hold packs over our heads and fight the current.

I had hiked the trail 4 or 5 times before, and I said there was no river like that at the other end. He said that the water currents had changed, and now there was this small river. I tried to imagine where that could be at the far end, which was mostly high and dry.

I remembered a long low bog, and asked if that's where this was. Yes, he said, that's where it was. I was a bit sceptical, but that's how it was left. Neither of my friends had hiked the trail before. So we carried on.

On the last day we went through this bog, which was exactly like I had remembered it. There was no river, no change in water current, nothing at all, it was pure lie.

After we went through the bog and climbed up on the ridge, I said to my friends, "that was the bog, boys, that's where that guy the first night said this river would be."

One of my friends looked at me with startled face. "I worried about that this whole trip. But it was nothing. There was nothing there to fear!"

And that is exactly the point of this whole sermon. We worry about death the whole trip. And once we've gone through it, we will say, "I worried about that this whole trip. But it was nothing. There was nothing to fear."

Once we've gone through death, we'll know that God was right, that the Scripture was right, that the reasons to fear death have been taken away.

We don't get to talk to the people who've gone through this. Right now, we have only God's words to count on. But once we've gone through it, we'll say, "I worried about that river this whole trip. But there was nothing to fear."

There is still often physical suffering as part of dying. And, the people who live on miss the person that's gone. In these ways death is still an enemy. But God thinks he made death itself no problem for the one going through it. Jesus became human and died so we no longer had to fear death. Grab hold of this, people. You have faith. Grab it.

Death and Healing – Dying is like being healed at the last moment. What if you had a disease that you knew would kill you, but you also knew that at the very end, on the day that you would die, instead of dying you'd be completely healed? This was for sure.

Would that make a difference to how you felt in your fatal illness? Would that encourage you at all, to know you would not die? But: How is that different that what will actually happen? What will happen is better, actually. The suffering will be really over.

Paul said that dying was better. God said we don't need to fear death any more. Amen.