

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 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 I'd be lucky to do 1 mile in 10 minutes. You will say, 'what do you expect? You're getting older.' No, I'm not getting older. I'm dying. Death is where I'm going. "Old" is just a town I 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 we will have a last day. But, God 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 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 do what we'd not otherwise choose. Fear of dying rules our lives.

We know we will die, and that we're afraid of dying, but this Scripture says that 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 obey, he fills us with the terror of death. That fear is his power, and our slavery. Fear of dying makes us do the wrong thing, we obey fear and not God.

We don't experience life like this. We tell ourselves that 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. Once in a while something makes us feel like we are now dying, and that is a remarkably unpleasant experience.

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 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 (do two things: one.) break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and (two.) free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

God says we have been freed from the fear of death. We don't have to fear dying anymore. Jesus has done something about death so that we don't need to be afraid anymore. Breaking that power, and freeing us from fear, are two ways to say much the same thing. God has acted so that death is no longer frightening.

This is remarkable, astonishing. 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 rest of this sermon about death will have three parts: first, what decides when we will die; the second and third parts are the Christian hope in two parts. What decides when we die, then Christian hope part one, then Christian hope part two.

The Lord Jesus Decides When we Die – In Revelation 1, when John sees Christ in his glory, Christ speaks to John. “*Don't be afraid, I was dead and now I live, and I have the keys of death and the grave.*” Rev 1:17-18. *Don't be afraid. I have the keys of death and the grave.*

For our Lord, there are no accidental deaths. Jesus decides who dies, and when. Often we don't like it, it breaks our heart, and makes no sense. All true. But remember who's in charge of this. I have the keys of death and the grave.

Earlier in Rev 1 we read that *Jesus Christ ... loves us, and has freed us from our sins by his blood.* That Jesus, who loves us and freed us from our sins, tells us, *Don't be afraid, I have the keys of death and the grave.*

In Revelation 11, the two witnesses represent believers. As long as God wants the witnesses to serve him, all the dark forces of evil are helpless to stop them. Dark forces try, but it does not work at all. When God decides that their service is complete, the beast from the pit conquers them and kills them.

But only when God decides their service is complete. Until then they were unstoppable. No believer has ever died one minute before their service to God was complete. Not one of us will die one minute before our service to God is complete.

Our society is fixated on making life longer. It is overrated. My sister was never healthy, and she died when she was 10, I was 17. Her mother, who is also my mother, is 90 years old. She eats cake and cinnamon rolls. She is also sturdy, and bright, has no health problems that I know about, and lives comfortably on her own.

Who decides things like that? My sister did nothing wrong to have all her troubles and die young, and my mother has not made a point doing all she can to live longer.

We all know lots of stories like this. Wake up, people. The Lord Jesus has the keys of death and the grave, so don't be afraid. We can't control life and death. Jesus told Peter, "If I want John the beloved disciple to live until I return, what is that to you?" Who decides how long John will live? Jesus does. Same for you and me.

Our Lord Jesus, who loves us and died for us, controls this. Don't be afraid. We could just relax, and let him decide how long we will live. Because, he already has decided.

Dying is a Chance to Bring Glory to God – We read in Php 1 that Paul was facing a trial in Rome, and if he was found guilty, he would be executed. He didn't know how the trial would go. But he said that he could bring glory to Christ either by living or by dying.

"As long as you pray," he tells the Philippian believers, "and the Holy Spirit helps me, I can bring glory to Christ with my body, whether I live or die. If you pray, and the Spirit helps, how I live brings glory to Christ, and how I die will also bring glory to Christ."

At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus told Peter how he would die. How he'd die is not that clear to us, but Peter got it. Then John the writer explains: Jesus was telling Peter by what death he would glorify God. Whenever a believer dies faithfully, their death brings glory to God. We glorify God with our bodies, by how we live, and then by how we die.

The Lord already knows by what kind of death you and I will bring glory to God. And he decides when it will happen. It will happen on the day he decides. None of these other monsters gets to decide. Our death may well be unpleasant, this certainly does not promise easy death. But our Lord alone decides when, and how.

We will keep praying for each other, if Paul needed that then we do, we will keep praying for each other, and the Holy Spirit will help, and then we bring praise to Christ with our bodies, as we live and then as we die. Dying is another chance to bring praise to Christ.

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 completely 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 tries 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. God tells us we don't need to fear death.

God's Promise Part 1 The 1<sup>st</sup> resurrection is that as soon as our body dies, we are with the Lord Jesus. God's promise part 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> resurrection: our bodies will be raised again.

God's promise part one. Paul was in prison and facing trial. If found innocent he would be freed; if found guilty he would be executed. Listen as Paul evaluates these options.

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

Not much fear of dying in Paul, not that day. 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 Cor 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. For we live by faith, not by sight. 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. Make this your testimony. *Therefore I am always confident, and I know, that as long as I am at home in my body, I am away from the Lord. For I live by faith, not by sight. I am confident, I say, and I would prefer to be, away from my body and at home with the Lord.*

Rev 20 says that the souls of believers who died will rule with Christ, and that is "the first resurrection." Over them the second death has no power. The second death is final judgement. The first resurrection is the souls of dead Christians being on thrones with Christ. That's what Paul calls being absent from the body, and present with the Lord.

That's the first part of our hope as followers of Christ, the first resurrection in Rev 20.

God's Promise Part 2. 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.

1 Cor 15 *So also with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*

1 Thess 4 *The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive, and remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.* That is God's promise, part 2.

Paul's hope is to be with the Lord. Did you catch that? He does not say he'll go to heaven, he does not say he'll meet his loved ones. To depart and **be with the Lord** is better by far. To be present in the body, is to be **absent from the Lord**, and we prefer to be absent from the body, and **present with the Lord**. Then we who remain will be caught up with them, and we will all **meet the Lord** in the air. And so we will all be **with the Lord** forever! Where will this be? Who cares! We'll be **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 deeply Christian book. Hebrews agrees entirely: all our lives we were slaves due to our fear of death.

The first three chapters of the Bible show how death begins, and the last three chapters of the Bible show how death ends. Death is the central human problem. The world might not know it has a sin problem, but it sure knows it has a death problem.

We'd rather avoid it. We don't want this talk. 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 alive. Why do we need to talk about dying?" I'll bet some of you have felt that. We avoid the problem.

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 gone, not to be seen again, but she was good, so let's be happy.

Christian funerals are sometimes celebrations of life. I mistrust this. I fear we are too determined to be happy, and we avoid facing our sadness and pain and loss. Death is ugly, make no mistake, and it is an enemy. But people, it is an enemy with a broken back.

If we will celebrate at funerals, let us celebrate Christ, who freed us from our fear of death. Let's mourn our loss, and celebrate our hope, and proclaim it to each other.

#### 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 Cariboo Lake the first night out, and met two 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 farther on, 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 farther on. 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.

Two days later, we went through this bog, which was just as I had remembered it. There was no river, no change in water current, nothing at all, it was a 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. "That was it? I worried about that this whole trip. There was nothing to fear!" And that is the point of this sermon. We worry about death the whole trip. And once we've gone through it, we will say, "That was it? I worried about that this whole trip. 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.

### Two Rooms and One Door

Imagine a dark room, and beside it a bright room. There is a wide door between them, it opens to the dark room, and it is wide open. The Lord Jesus is holding the door open, facing the people in the dark room.

The dark room is slavery to the fear of all the things that will be the end of us, all the things that can bring us down, destroy us, wipe us out. It's slavery to the fear of dying. The other room is bright, because it has three big windows, and light comes in through the windows, and from that room we can see out through the windows.

The first window is that the one who loves us and laid down his life for us holds the keys of death and the grave. The second window is our confidence that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, and that is far better. The third window is that our bodies, which we are right to love, will be raised as eternal and imperishable bodies, and we will be with the Lord forever.

The Lord Jesus is looking at all of us still in the dark room, and he says to us, "What are you doing in here? You shouldn't be in here, still frightened of whatever will bring you to the end. I died so this door would be open, and you could go into the bright room. Get out of here. It's not good for you that you're still here, and it's not good for me either. Come with me, let's go into the bright room."

There are frightened believers in the bright room. Not all the fear is gone, not at all. But we are resolved to look out those windows and see what is there and soak up the warmth. We will live confidently, trusting in the light that comes through. And we will die the same way. As many have done before us. Amen.

**PRAYER:** O God, thank you for so much light about our biggest fear. Thank you that our Lord holds the keys of death and the grave. We put our souls and our bodies in his hands. Thank you that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Thank you that you will raise these bodies eternal and imperishable, so we can be with the Lord forever and inherit the kingdom you prepared for us. Thank you for such light.

**DOXOLOGY:** To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, to him who died to free us who were slaves to the fear of death all our lives, to him who holds the keys of death and the grave and says "do not fear," to him who is coming in power to get us, to him be praise and thanks and glory and power, forever and ever. Amen.

Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.