Death and the Christian [1]

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"*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants. Truly I am your servant, Lord; I serve you just as my mother did; you have freed me from my chains.*" — Psalm 116:15–16 (NIV)

A few years ago—while I was still doing my post-graduate degree—my church offered a small, informal course on how to prepare and deliver Bible talks. When we had completed the course, we all went out for a "graduation" lunch. At some point the conversation turned to the future, and for some reason the pastor made a comment that, in 20 years' time, not all of us sitting around the table would still be alive. I remember some shocked looks and one girl in particular replying with "You don't really think that, do you?". It may have seemed like a cynical comment, but I understood the pastor's perspective. Life is short, frail and unpredictable. If you are in your early to mid twenties, then it is easy to think yourself invincible and push your own mortality out of your mind: you are attending parties, marriages, christenings—new beginnings; while the only funerals many are likely to attend are for elderly grandparents, who had lived full lives. But the pastor had seen it before: only a few years before, one of the young interns at the church died tragically in a car accident.

Of the people in "my generation"1 at the church at that time, the first has now departed to go be with his Father and Saviour. His funeral was on Saturday.

In the last few years, I have attended a number of funerals: mostly for parents of friends. But after my last grandparent passed away in 2008 (after a number of years of suffering from dementia), death has not struck too closely for me. That said, I do regularly think about death, especially when my parents are ill. Funerals—anyone's—hit me hard. I always think about my own mortality, and am reminded that death is not, in fact, natural. Rather, it is a violation of God's good creation: a punishment for a fitting crime, sin. It is a reminder of why Jesus wept when He saw the effects of death, and to be angry at it (John 11:28–44).

The thing about the funeral of a Christian, though, is that it is a mix of emotions. There definitely is sadness and loss, yes; but there is also joy in knowing that someone has been reunited with their Father in heaven and has been released from the mortal coil of sickness, injury, sadness and suffering. While some did view the funeral as a celebration of the young life which had just passed away—even secular humanists sometimes use that language—for the Christian the ultimate joy is found in two things: knowing that the person has been reunited with the Saviour whom they loved (a desire every Christian has), and knowing that they will be reunited some day in glory. This is not merely some coping mechanism to deal with grief or fantastic thinking: belief in the resurrection lies at the core of the Christian faith, as the apostle Paul so powerfully explains in 1 Corinthians 15.

Facing your own mortality is a tough thing to do. One can argue that the Christian should not have to struggle with it, but it can be if you are still imbued with youthful energy and ambition. While we, as young Christian people, can have the assurance that death is not the end, we also still want to be in, explore, and by God's grace, change the world which we are in now. But what scares me more is not my own death. Firstly, I am afraid of losing someone close to me without them knowing how much

they mean to me. This is perhaps a universal struggle, and all people, Christian and non-Christian alike, should set to work to make sure that this does not happen. But secondly, and even more powerfully, is the fear of losing someone who falls away: who does not call Christ their Saviour, and with whom I shall not be reunited at the resurrection at the end of time. St. Augustine calls the thought to this happening "intolerable grief" [2]: one which would be perpetual while here on earth. And thus, going forward (having passed the watershed of where our generation begins to depart the world), every funeral is likely to feel like the pull of a trigger while playing Russian roulette: if it is a Christian that passes away, there is joy, but if it is a non-Christian, then time has run out for that person. The Groom will have called them, but their lamps had run out of fuel, and they are left in darkness.

Please understand the urgency of this. If you are a Christian, remember that the sand is running out for the unsaved. And please also pray for me, that I shall always remember this, and work with urgency to minimise my intolerable grief.

- 1. The church I attended at that time was a student church, so it had a "turnover" or "generation" of about four to six years.

Categories:

- Missions [3]

Tags:

- death [4]
- resurrection [5]
- hope [6]
- future [7]
- loss [8]
- grief [9]
- funeral [10]
- mourning [11]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1092

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1092
[2] https://siyach.org/1038
[3] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/23
[4] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/347
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/282
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/284
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/348
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/349
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/350
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/351
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/352