

Opening Words – Ted Johnson

Funerals are hard. There's no getting around it. Few, if any would naturally say – “I would rather be at a funeral than...”

No, none of us would have wanted to be here today. But Solomon the Wise, the 3rd King of Israel, whom God especially gifted with a supernatural kind of wisdom and insight into life says he would rather go to a funeral than a party.

Eccl 7:2 – *It is better to go into a house of mourning, than to go to a house of feasting.* “Better”?? Really? That is not the word we would choose.

He goes on to say (v. 4) – *The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.*

And what he means by that is that if we try to continuously keep ourselves in a constant state of pleasure, and never experience the pains of life – then we become a fool. But if we will not ignore the reality of the brokenness of this world, and specifically go and sit in the house of mourning – we will become wise; we will know how to live life better.

And why does he say that??? He tells us – *“because THAT (the cause of mourning – death) is the end of every man, and the living take it to heart.”*

It is only as we grapple with the issues of life and death, and take the perspective gained “into our heart” that we truly learn how to live life. Because death is the doorway to eternity, and no matter what you think about what follows death, your thinking on this will determine how you live life. It is that important.

And within that vein, we are going to consider both life and death today. We are going to remember Pam's life, all the joyous things, the important things, the friendships, the family, the accomplishments, the ups, the downs. And we are going to rejoice in all those things.

And we also are going to consider death – not only that Pam is no longer with us, but also the questions of “where is Pam now?” And “what is beyond the grave?” And what will our eternity be?

Message – Ted Johnson

Now we need to talk about death. Death is difficult to experience and talk about, no matter how or when it comes. But it is even more difficult when it comes suddenly and unexpectedly. And the difficulty is exponentially compounded when one takes their own life. A strange mixture of emotions sets in for those remaining behind. There is the natural grief and sorrow, but also many feel a sense of confusion,

perhaps even rejection, frustration, even anger, or despair. Some begin to question everything. Suddenly the world is a shaky place and unstable. We say, “this shouldn’t happen” and “does anything even make sense anymore.” Especially when the one who takes their life happens to one who is known to be so strong and stable in their faith and in their Christian hope and walk throughout life.

As the preacher here, I want to be the first to acknowledge that I have had to wrestle myself this week with these kinds of runaway emotions. It is very disorienting.

What we need are not religious clichés or personal opinions – that will not help.

What we need when we walk through a house in the dark is to find some trusted reference point – “ah, there is the couch, now I know where I am.” We have got to have some anchor points for our thinking here. We can’t just continue in confusion.

What we need to hear is the truth. Jesus prayed to His Father for us – “*Sanctify them (set them apart, make them different) in the truth; Your Word is truth.*”

When Paul writes to the Thessalonians about death, he says, “*I do not want you to be uninformed...*”

That is what we need – to be informed. Not by some self-help guru or philosopher who is surmising about life – but informed by God Himself in the pages of the Bible – truths about life and death from the Author of life and death. Such truths are set against so many untruths about life and death out there and arising in here (minds).

So, let me begin by identifying some wrong thinking on the matter of a strong believer in Christ who takes their life, and then let God’s Word set the record straight.

And in this, I just want to be very direct in clearing away this fog.

1) **Suicide is not the unpardonable sin** – you have heard this, right?

This is nowhere in the Bible, and come from those who have spun up this idea that there are two different categories of sin (those sins that irritate God, but because He has a big heart, He will wave them off in the end); and those sin that anger God (for which He will send you to hell), especially if you have not specifically confessed them to a priest or something. And since taking a life is a “big one” and since suicide offers you no opportunity to confess – such a one is doomed.

The Bible makes no such distinctions. All transgressions of God’s Law are an equal affront to God and equally separate us from God. James 2:10 – *whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point (no matter the point), has become guilty of all.* Romans 6:23 – *The wages of sin (no categorization) is death, BUT the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.*

This is the truth – that all of us are guilty before God – and the means of salvation is not through confessing every sin individually anyway – but by faith in Jesus’ once and for all work for us on the cross. Trust that He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross!

2) No true, sincere Christian could get that despondent, so as to take their own life.

Suicide is certainly not commended or even allowed as an acceptable option by God. But the reality is that trusting in Christ, having the Spirit within, knowing God’s Word, many years of faithful walking with the Lord – none of that makes us impervious to despondency, depression, temptation. Some of the Bible’s greatest saints struggled with thoughts of suicide – Moses, Job, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah – even Paul says in 2 Cor 1 – *due to our afflictions, we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life...*

The spiritual battles and the enemy that true believers face are real; and we are naturally frail, and it is truly possible to become so overwhelmed that without God’s intervention – any of us could come to “despair of living.”

3) Pam is not responsible for her decision (she was depressed, etc...)

This may sound like it is rescuing Pam from an indignity, but rather it tends to undercut what the Bible is clear about: the dignity of humans made in God’s image – we are not beasts, merely responding to stimuli. We are volitional beings, able to think and act. Thus we are responsible to God. Heb 9:27 – *it is appointed unto men to die once, and after this comes judgment.* We might be excused by a human court, but before God, we will answer for everything done in this life.

None of know exactly why Pam made the decision she did in that moment – nor will we ever in this life. This is part of the agonizing.

But this is the joy of the Bible’s primary message – that for those like Pam who came to trust in Jesus without reservation – salvation is secured eternally for her. Her momentary decision to transgress God’s law was nailed to the cross as Jesus graciously paid for the sins of those who are His.

So, Pam will suffer the loss of reward she might have gained for future faithfulness in this life, but she will not have to pay the penalty (any judgment) for that sin – Jesus already paid it all.

4) We are somehow responsible for Pam’s decision

Some would seek to take blame on themselves, or cast it on others. “If only I had...” “If only they had...” “Surely there is some formula or procedure we can follow to keep something like this from happening.”

Well, yes, there are sound and biblical ways to help others who are depressed and discouraged with life... but to claim that somehow we have God's kind of infinite knowledge and insight into another person's soul or circumstance, is simply arrogant over-reach. We simply do not know all what is needed, and we simply cannot keep another person from a poor decision if they become intent upon it.

5) **This one act now defines Pam's life and colors all our memories of her**

No – first, we are called in the Scripture to *do unto others as we would have them do unto us*. None of us would want one momentary decision made in a moment of weakness to define our lives, especially such an uncharacteristic one.

Second, Scripture call us to forgive – in the very same way that God forgives us. *So far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our sins from those who entrust themselves to His Son.*

In other words – He treats us as if He has forgotten our wrongs. What a gracious God!

We are called to do the same – Mark 11:25 – *When you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone.*

Just there before God, we just release Pam from the anger, the hurt, the confusion her act has caused us. And we don't remember her for that.

So, now hopefully having cleared away much of the fog of wrong thinking about a certain kind of death, let me now point you plainly to what the Scripture says about confident hope in the face of death – no matter how it comes...

To do that I want to simply point an encounter between Jesus and a woman named Martha – a woman of strong faith, upon the occasion of the death of a loved one. Because in this encounter, among other places in Scripture, we find the answer, the secret, the grand perspective on life and death, and even the very reason why it is good that we are here today... I think you will find it very helpful...

John 11 – let me just relay the encounter in the words of John (drawing out the parallels with our situation today)...

READ v. 1-5

So, the messenger returns with Jesus' reply... "Ah, hope! Things are going to improve, get better, be okay. Life will return to normal. Jesus has promised to help. We knew He would!"

But then a strange and unexpected thing happened.

READ v. 6-7

Jesus is at least a two-day journey away... Thus he leaves His friend Lazarus in that condition for at least 4 more days... In fact, suffering more all the time.

READ v. 11-14

Whoa! Whoa! I thought you said...

But before they can finish their accusation of wrong-doing, Jesus continues...

READ v. 15

Jesus was not glad about His friend suffering, but He has an even greater purpose in mind – which does not even have anything to do with Lazarus himself.

He says, *“But so that YOU might believe.”*

Jesus had His own purpose for Lazarus’ life; and even his sickness and ultimately his death. And Jesus being God, he doesn’t have to explain to us His sovereign purpose and plan – but in this special case... He did... So that other specific individuals might believe.

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead 4 days. Martha hears of His arrival in town and goes out to meet Him.

READ v. 21

“You could have prevented this.” And you can almost hear in her voice, “and I thought You were going to!” This is at the same time a statement of strong faith in Jesus’ power over disease and sickness, and also a statement of frustration about why Jesus allowed her loved one, a man whom Jesus Himself loved, to suffer and then die. He could have prevented this!

Do you believe that Jesus could have prevented Pam’s death? If so, then you are right – and that is a measure of faith.

Are you somewhat frustrated about the fact that He did not?

Okay – we are right here in this moment – in this text.

Martha makes a further statement of faith in v. 22

READ v. 22

We are not really sure what Martha is asking for (and maybe Martha isn’t either), but there is a strong sense in her, that Jesus’ power extends even beyond the grave.

Jesus responds – READ v. 23

Martha immediately connects this statement to the promise of the prophets of a future resurrection to glory for God's people. So she further expresses her belief in God by believing what He had said in His Word...

READ v. 24

To which Jesus replies...

READ v. 25-26

This is it – Jesus has just said it all – He Himself IS the key – belief / trust in Him is the single path to life beyond the grave. Such that even if we die physically, we will live on with God in heaven – through faith in Jesus.

This is why Jesus earlier told His disciples that He was glad that He was not there to keep Lazarus alive physically – so that He could punctuate this most important lesson of His power and authority not only over this life, but also the next...

And ultimately, as He said – *so that you may believe.*

This is why He adds the penetrating question to the end of His statement.
Do you believe this?

To which Martha replies...

READ v. 27

When she said this, the conversation was over, and she went away and got Mary, who had her own conversation with Jesus that fell along very similar lines.

But the conversation was over, because the whole point had been made.

Could Jesus have kept Pam from suffering, and increasingly so over this past year?
Yes.

Could Jesus have kept Pam from that dark and cloudy moment in which she ended her own life? Yes.

Lazarus was brought back to life that day – not so that we should expect Jesus to always protect the physical lives of those whom He loves. But so that we would know that life beyond the grave comes from Him and through Him. So that we might believe

in Him for eternal life.

And like Martha... Pam believed in Him.

Simple reception of Jesus in faith, the One whom God gave to us as our Salvation.
Jesus said, *"I am the resurrection and the life"*

Do you wish to one day be with Pam in Jesus' presence beyond the grave?
Then you must answer the question – *Do you believe this?*

Can you say with the Psalmist in Psalm 73 –
Whom have I in heaven but You, O Lord? And besides You I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Behold those who are far from You will perish, but as for me, the nearness of my God is my good.

Or as the modern song-writer says – "It is well with my soul?"
Not just a temporary emotional easing kind of wellness, but an absolute certainty that you are right with God because you believe that Jesus IS what is beyond the grave – and you have entrusted yourself entirely to Him.

Pam believed, and hope / trust is what marked her life, and what even now is causing her the greatest joy – as her faith has become sight... she has gained a joy and a wellness from Jesus that will last forever. Such a life and such an eternal joy is available to each of us as well. *Do you believe this?*