

Dying Well

Ryan Kregel

How will you die? Will you die well?

“What silly questions to ask,” you say.

And then you lose a loved one.

Tragically.

Or you receive the doctor’s report that you will not live as long as you expected, and your life comes to a screeching halt.

Suddenly.

Now you are forced to think about death. It’s all you can think about because of death’s cold gaze staring you in the face. Death’s cold grip is so real and you can’t seem to slip away.

The opening questions are probably ones you neither have asked anyone nor been asked yourself. Thoughts about death don’t usually arise until death actually grips you or someone close. We spend our days living uninterrupted as we always have, so thoughts about life receive all of our attention.

But how often do we think about death? How often do we think about *our* death? It’s something we should think about. Will we die well? How can we die well? If by dying “well” we mean “properly,” is there a proper way to die? Death is, well, death. By God’s grace there is. By faith we know and are assured that there is a proper way to die.

First, you die well by living perfectly in this life. Perfectly? Is that even possible? We will carry our sinful nature until the day we die, so how do we live perfectly?

Consider what the word “perfect” actually refers to in scripture. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord and was “perfect in his generations” (Gen. 6:8, 9). David vowed to behave himself “wisely and in a perfect way” and to walk within his house “with a perfect heart” (Ps. 101:2). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commanded his disciples to be perfect “even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). The apostle Paul exhorted the church at Corinth to “be perfect” (2 Cor. 13:11). Keep in mind that all of these references to perfection were tied to sinful men. Noah was guilty of the sin of drunkenness; David was an adulterer who committed murder to cover up his sin; Jesus’ disciples abandoned him in his hour of need. Paul persecuted the church. How could these men be considered perfect and even insist on the perfection of others?

Perfection has in our modern language come to mean “flawless.” But biblical perfection refers to completion or spiritual maturity. Saints (including the ones listed above), while sinners, mature spiritually. We can see that in our own lives. We, through the sanctification of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, make spiritual progress. Do we stumble and fall? Yes, even grievously at

times, but there is development nonetheless. So how is spiritual maturity reflected in our lives? We live not for ourselves, but for Jesus Christ. We confess with Paul, “the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). How tragic is the thought of facing death knowing it is the culmination of a life lived not for Christ, but for self? How tragic is the thought of facing death after a life of pursuing the sinful pleasures of the world? There is no peace with God in the death of one who has lived like this; only cold, empty nothingness.

Second, you die well when you confess with Paul, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). When you live “wisely and in a perfect way” (Ps. 101:2), exalting Christ as the reason you live, then you die well, as Paul did, viewing your inevitable death as a *gain* rather than a loss.

When you confess that to live is Christ, included in that are the sufferings of Christ. Our spiritual connection to Christ often brings earthly suffering. Paul often associated the suffering of saints with the suffering of Christ. We bear “about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body (2 Cor. 4:10). “As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter” (Rom. 8:36). “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (Gal. 6:17). “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord... That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death” (Phil. 3:8, 10). Our suffering is part of “living Christ.”

What about viewing death as gain? Does this imply that true saints are those who go around hoping to die soon? No, rather they are enabled by the death of Christ to view their own death as a part of God’s bringing them to be with him (John 17:24).

In conclusion, dying well is really about living well, that is, living godly. But don’t focus on the person, focus on the one working faith in the person, enabling him to live perfectly and view death as a gain. And true gain is this, that God, the one who works faith in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, is the one that we will behold “in righteousness.” Then and only then we “shall be satisfied” when we awake with his likeness (Ps. 17:15).

Originally published in:

Vol. 77 No. 10 October 2018