



Facing Death and the Life After

by Billy Graham

The conversation at the party became hushed as someone reported that a friend has just been told he had cancer. A psychiatrist—a strong, handsome man who was a prominent member of the social and professional community—said, "I'm scared to death of dying." He smiled sheepishly at his feeble pun, but he had expressed honestly what so many people feel.

In spite of rapid and ever-increasing advances in medical technology and pain relief, no one has found a way to lessen people's fear of dying. This is not some new psychosis but a condition as old as man. David, the bold youth who defied the giant Goliath, the king who pursued his enemies and destroyed them, is the same man who cried out, "My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me"¹

My friend, Jack Black, has defined fear as "an emotion that speaks of dread, fright, alarm, panic, trepidation and consternation." All human beings capable of thinking manifest these emotions. Thus, fear is universal in all times and places. It

is a normal, human response to the unknown. And death, the experience of death, is an unknown.

The greatest fear comes when God is a stranger. What do sheep do without a shepherd? They stumble in the darkness. The Bible says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way."² And that's our picture: going in all directions, bumping into each other and not being able to find our way home. Fear stalks our every turn.

The Bible refers to fear more than 500 times, generally telling us not to be afraid. There are so many "fear nots" that we could probably have one for every day in the year: and then some! Look at a few of them:

"Fear not, for I am with thee."³

"Fear not them which kill the body."⁴

"Fear not: believe only."⁵

"Fear not; I am the first and the last."⁶

But wait. What do we do with the "fear of the Lord"? If the Bible says "fear not," and yet it also says "fear," which does it mean? The answer is: both. Fear is a twofold word. It refers to an emotion marked by dread and anxious concern. But it is also the word that means awe and profound reverence. This is the fear that inspires trust and confidence.

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When we fear God, we don't cringe before him like a prisoner robbed of his freedom by a ruthless dictator. Our fear is a love which causes us to treat him with respect. This is what the Prophet Isaiah meant when he said, "The fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure." It is a reverence that comes when we see the majesty and holiness of our loving heavenly Father.

There is no shame in being afraid; we're all afraid from time to time. But there's an interesting paradox here, in that if we fear God with all our hearts, there will be nothing else to fear. When I see a child placing his little hand confidently in the bigger hand of his father, I recognize the sort of fear that fosters trust.

Was Jesus afraid?

We know that Jesus was the only Person in history who was born without sin, who lived without sin and who died sinless. Since that is so, why did he display such anguish, sorrow and fear in the Garden of Gethsemane? There are few episodes in the history of man more dramatic than what took place in that little garden during Christ's final hours on earth.

Gethsemane means "an oil press." Most of us are familiar with olive oil as an ingredient in salads or cooking. In Palestine it was, and is, a valued staple. The Mount of Olives is frequently mentioned in the New Testament and is intimately connected with the devotional life of Jesus. It was on the Mount of Olives that he often sat with his disciples, telling them of events yet to come. And it was to the Mount of Olives that he retired each evening for prayer and rest, after the

weary work of the day.

When olives are harvested, they are squeezed, pressed and pulverized under an enormous revolving stone which mashes the fruit to pulp and recovers the valuable oil. It was in the Garden of Gethsemane that the wheel of humiliation, defeat and eventually death would grind Jesus to the point of his greatest personal agony. Emotional torment is many times more difficult to bear than physical torment. At Gethsemane, the place of the press, the mental anguish was so intense that Jesus pleaded with his holy Father for release. But only if it was the Father's will.

As Jesus prayed, his agony was great, "and being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground."⁸ Does that seem impossible? Medical dictionaries describe this condition as "chromhidrosis," a state in which intense emotional stress may actually cause the blood vessels to expand so much that they break where they come in contact with the sweat glands. I cannot begin to comprehend such overpowering emotion.

Jesus prayed three times, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."⁹

Was there a way out? Could Jesus be delivered from the horrors of such a death—at least for a time?

Jesus did not take delight in his approaching crucifixion; he loved life on this earth. He enjoyed the pleasures of walking with his disciples, holding children on his knees, attending a wedding, eating with friends, riding in a boat or working in the temple at Passover time. To Jesus, death was the enemy. When he prayed, "If it is possible," he wanted to confirm once



again if his imminent death was truly the Father's will. Was there some other way?

But what did he mean by his plea to "let this cup pass from me"?

In the Scriptures "cup" is used figuratively to describe either God's blessing¹⁰ or God's wrath.¹¹ Since Jesus would not have prayed for God's blessing to be taken from him, it is obvious that his use of "cup" here speaks of the divine wrath that Christ would suffer at the cross as he bore the sins of mankind upon himself.

How unthinkable it seems to us for Jesus, who knew no sin, to have to bear the sin and guilt of all men. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us."¹¹ Was there no other way of accomplishing the will of the Father without drinking that cup of wrath?

This was the question Jesus was asking—and in complete obedience to the Father's sovereign will Jesus voluntarily accepted the answer. No, there was no other way for a just and loving God to deal with our sins.

Sin must be punished; if God were simply to forgive our sins without judging them, then there would be no justice, no accountability for wrongdoing, and God is not truly holy and just. And if God were simply to judge us for our sins as we deserve to be judged, then there would be no hope of eternal life and salvation for any of us—for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."¹² His love would have failed to provide a way for our salvation.

The cross was the only way to resolve this awesome problem. The conflict of the ages was about to reach its climax. On one hand, our sins were about to be placed on Christ, the sinless One. He

would be "clothed" in our sins as in a filthy, tattered old garment, and on the cross those sins would be judged—your sins, my sins. He would be the final atoning sacrifice for sin. On the other hand, however, Christ's perfect righteousness would be given to us, like a spotless, gleaming set of new clothes. Sin was therefore judged, and God's justice was satisfied. The door of forgiveness and salvation was opened, and God's love was satisfied. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."¹³

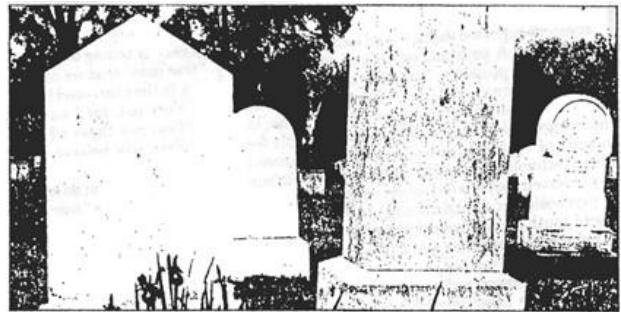


Photo: L. George/H. Armstrong Roberts, Inc.

Even as Jesus, in his humanity, struggled within himself over this awesome predicament, he finally prayed, "Thy will be done."¹⁴ This was not a prayer spoken with a sigh of resignation, but with a strong voice of complete trust. Jesus knew this meant total and absolute surrender to the will of the Father and to the needs of others. Yet there is a mystery here that we cannot fully understand. Jesus surely experienced the overwhelming awareness of his inevitable sacrifice for the sins of the world. He knew this was his primary mission on earth, for he had said, "Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."¹⁵



"Jesus has taken away the fear of death for those who trust in him. We do not need to be ashamed of our fear, but we can rest assured that he will give us strength when we have none of our own, courage when we are cowardly, and comfort when we are hurting"

The Garden of Gethsemane is the place where Jesus was revealed to be a true man. He was face to face with the choice between obedience or disobedience. He was not a robot programmed to obey God automatically. He can sympathize with our weaknesses: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."¹⁶ Satan tempted Jesus all through his ministry, but the temptations, in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry can scarcely compare to those in the garden. After three years of selfless giving and the stress of that final week, Jesus was never more vulnerable than at this moment of time.

Some skeptics have said that Jesus' suffering in Gethsemane was a sign of weakness. They point out that many martyrs, for instance, died without the intense emotional wrestling of Jesus.

But it is one thing to die for a cause, or to die for a country or for another person. It is quite another to die for an entire world, all the accumulated sins of genera-

tions past and generations to come.

No other death in the history of mankind can be compared to the death of Jesus Christ. Many may have suffered as much or more physically, but no one suffered more spiritually. His battle against the powers of darkness, in its essence, meant the triumph of God over Satan. No mere man could defeat Satan—only the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

Christ's death can save everyone who believes in him. God has given each of us one life and one time to die. We may live for others or perish in our own selfishness.

If the thought of dying for others is startling, think of what it means to say "yes" to Jesus, just as he said "yes" to the Father. When we accept Christ as our Savior and know that he died on the cross for our sins, we have been crucified with him. Our sins hung on that cross, just as our Lord did.

A friend of mine walks every morning and has been memorizing Bible verses as he walks. He told me that one morning he began to repeat the following verse, and for the first time understood what it meant to be crucified. Here is that verse: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and 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."¹⁷

What is the alternative? Instead of Christ living in us, it would be self. To die without Christ is to take one's own life.

Jesus had a choice, and so do we. Did he have fear? Was the "King of Terrors" with him in that grove of olive trees, stalking him as he prayed on the damp ground, his sweat mixed with blood?

But Jesus has taken away the fear of death for those who trust in him. We do not need to be ashamed of our fear, but



we can rest assured that he will give us strength when we have none of our own, courage when we are cowardly, and comfort when we are hurting.

When fear enters one's life, which it will, the faith which God supplies will defeat the terror and give us victory. Just as knowledge is one of the greatest deterrents to fear, so will our understanding of death enable us to combat fear. The key to victory is found in Solomon's words, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."¹⁸

We fear the unknown, but we can explore that together while we are still in the land of the living.

(1) Psalm 55:4-5, NIV. (2) Isaiah 53:6, NIV. (3) Genesis 26:24, KJV. (4) Matthew 10:28, KJV. (5) Luke 8:50, KJV. (6) Revelation 1:17, KJV. (7) Isaiah 33:6, NIV. (8) Luke 22:44, NIV. (9) Matthew 26:39, NIV. (10) Psalm 23:5. (11) Psalm 75:8. (12) 2 Corinthians 5:21, NIV. (13) Romans 3:23, NIV. (14) Matthew 6:10, KJV; Luke 11:2, KJV. (15) Mark 10:45, NIV. (16) Hebrews 4:15, NIV. (17) Galatians 2:20, KJV. (18) Proverbs 1:7, KJV.

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