

Walking through the Valley of the Shadow of Death

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Personal Bible Study and Reflection

In January 2005, I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of prostate cancer and had surgery two months later. I also lost a friend, Amy, and my Uncle Cliff to cancer about the same time. Both had a strong faith in Christ. As I watched Amy and Cliff walk through their final days here on earth, and as I thought about my future, I began to look at the Bible to see what it said about how to go through the death of our physical bodies, how to end our life well. It will happen at some point in time to all of us, so how can I be prepared? How can I walk through that time with faith as I've done with other days, situations and times in my life?

Here are some of the passages and thoughts I felt God gave me from His Word as I contemplated this subject:

1. Preparing

“A wise person thinks much about death, while the fool thinks only about having a good time now.” (Ecclesiastes 7:4 NLT) Stephen Covey in his book *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* says that the #1 habit is to begin with the end in mind. Thinking about the end of my life and how I want to live out those final days is a wise thing to do. When I had my cancer surgery, I asked the Lord for a “game plan” on how to go through that time – What should I think about? How should I relate to those around me? What should I do to trust God and not be afraid? God gave me a game plan that made my emotional and spiritual journey through my surgery a wonderful experience. It seems wise to me to ask God for a game plan to follow as I walk through the final days of my earthly life.

The Apostle Peter provides us with a good game plan in 2 Peter 1:5-11 that will “richly provide for us an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”. The game plan is to not stop with our initial faith in God, but to keep building on that faith every day of our lives:

“For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. ¹⁰Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; ¹¹so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

A wise older gentlemen once said to me, “Life is a perpetual series of ‘letting goes’, until at last we let go of everything but God. In the end, if we have God, we have everything. If we don’t have God, we have nothing.” It seems to me that God has designed all of life to draw us to Himself. It is the most loving thing He can do, because the closer we come to Him, the

source of all life, the more abundant our life becomes. Psalm 16:11 says, “You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” That same thought is echoed in Colossians 2:10, “You have come to fullness of life in Him, Who is the head of all rule and authority”. I want to live my life each day drawing closer and closer to God. I believe that is the path of life. And I believe it is also the path to take in preparing for the day when God takes me home to be with Him forever. As the Apostle Paul says, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:14)

2. Perspective

Our society uses all types of terms for a person dying – they expired, they passed on, they went home to be with the Lord, they died, they had a terminal disease. I like how Luke 9:51 captures Jesus’ perspective – “When the days drew near for him to be *received up*, He set his face to go to Jerusalem.” My dad once told me of a businessman he knew who lived his life with little regard for God. At his funeral, his body was in the casket clothed with gold rings and an expensive suit, and all my dad could think was, “Friend, you’re all dressed up and have no place to go.” We, as those who have trusted Christ for eternal life, have a place to go!

Jesus Himself promised us, “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also”. (John 14:2-3) I always liked the Star Trek episodes when the commander would say, “Beam me up, Scotty.” That’s the way I want to leave this world, saying, “Beam me up, Lord!”

Several times in the Old Testament, the phrase is used “and he was gathered to his fathers” or “he was gathered to his people” (Abraham – Genesis 25:8, Isaac – Genesis 35:29, Jacob – Genesis 49:33, Josiah – 2 Kings 22:20). God has promised us eternal life, to be with Him to share His glory for all eternity. And He uses the death of our physical bodies to “gather” us to be with Him – what an assurance! “Our body is like a house we live in here on earth. When it is destroyed, we know that God has another body for us in heaven. The new one will not be made by human hands as a house is made. This body will last forever.” (2 Corinthians 5:1 NLV)

Luke 9:30-31 also records, “And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he (Jesus) was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” When my son left for his new job in Seattle after college, he departed from where we currently live. It was a tearful time, because I knew I wouldn’t see him again for some time, and that he would probably never again be part of my daily life. There was some grieving involved at the loss of the everyday relationship. But I also knew where he was, that our separation would not be permanent, and that God held him in His hands. I want to have that same attitude when I depart from my loved ones someday – it is just a departure, it’s not the end of the story.

3. Resolve

Luke 9:51 says that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” when His days were ending. Jesus didn’t fight God about what was happening in His life. Even His last words were, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Luke 23:46) David said in Psalm 57:2, “I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me.” He also said in Psalm 139:16, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” Both Jesus’ and David’s attitude was one of trusting God to work out His purposes in their lives.

This doesn’t mean that Jesus didn’t have to struggle with real feelings. Matthew 26:39 says, “And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.’” Jesus went to the Father in prayer with the feelings and fears He experienced, but through honestly talking to God in prayer about them, God poured out His grace and strength and perspective. I have a friend who was diagnosed with a serious heart condition. He told me that he was struggling with trusting God with his life ending prematurely, and finally went out and took a four-hour walk, telling God everything he was feeling. At the end of the time, he said he felt God’s peace and grace pour into his soul and he was able to go back with confidence to face his situation. Resolve comes not from denying our feelings or sugar-coating the situation by simply saying, “God works everything for good”, but by honestly praying through our feelings with our heavenly Father, listening and letting His Spirit minister His grace to us. The Apostle Paul puts it this way, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13) Yes, we grieve as everyone does, but as ones who have hope!

In contrast, when Hezekiah was told by Isaiah that he should put his house in order because his time to die had come (2 Kings 20:3), Hezekiah wept bitterly. God granted him an extra 15 years, but if you read on in 2 Kings 20:13-17, it would have been better if Hezekiah had died earlier, as the Lord first told him. I don’t want to argue with God or weep bitterly over the day of my death. I want to trust God that He knows what He is doing, and my life is in His hands and timing. This life is not the last chapter of my story. God is preparing a Bride for His Son, and my life and my death as one who belongs to Him are part of that plan. If the death of my physical body is part of accomplishing that plan, which I believe is the reality, then I will trust God! David ended his famous lines in Psalm 23 with a strong statement of personal conviction, “And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” I want to have the same resolve, to keep my eyes resolutely set on what is before me.

The Apostle John also records in John 21:19, “This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.” He was referring to Jesus’ comments about Peter’s future death. I have chosen to live my life in ways that will honor and bring glory to God, so why would facing my death be any different? Lord, would You be glorified in my physical death.

4. Focus

I once heard a quote that went something like this... “As we approach the end of our lives, we have a choice of where to place our focus – on the sunset of this life, or on the sunrise of eternity. Both are happening at the same time, and where we choose to focus will have a lot to do with the way we physically die.” The Apostle Paul at the end of his life said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:7-8)

A few hours before my Uncle Cliff passed away, he said to his son, “Why are you crying? I’m going home to be with the Lord!” Cliff had his focus on the eternity ahead of him. He knew his Lord, and looked forward with great expectation to seeing Him face-to-face.

I love the ending of the Disney movie *Beauty and the Beast*, right after the beast is killed by Gaston. All of a sudden while Belle is weeping over the dead body of the beast, “magic” begins to happen and the beast is raised, transformed, given a new body and brought back to life. It is an amazing scene and a wonderful allegorical picture of what our resurrection to a new life will be like, only it won’t be magic – it will be real! The God who created me and loves me has the power to give life to the dead! (Romans 4:17)

Paul had a very positive and hopeful focus concerning death. Listen to his words in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

In his book *Destined for the Throne*, Paul Billheimer describes how God put all of history and creation in motion to prepare a Bride for His Son. At the end of time, when the current heaven and earth are destroyed, there will be a new heaven and earth where we who belong to Christ will reign with Him as His Bride, share His glory and build eternity together. What a glorious future! All this is described in Revelation 19-22, beginning in chapter 19 with the majesty of the wedding feast of the Lamb, our wedding where we’ll be united with Christ as His eternal Bride. I want my focus to be on all that is waiting for me as one who belongs to Christ.

Listen also to Job’s focus in Job 19:25-27 (NIV), “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” Job drove down a stake that he would focus on the hope that was set before him.

5. Our Physical Bodies and our Souls

It is easy to confuse our physical bodies with our real selves – our souls. When we are done with our physical bodies, our souls live on, and God will give us new immortal bodies. Listen to Peter's words in 1 Peter 1:3-9...

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. ⁹As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls.”

The end of this life will culminate in great victory, the salvation of our souls!

1 Corinthians 15:35-57 may be one of the most wonderful passages in the Bible on this subject. Listen to how Paul writes about it...

“But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ ³⁶You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. ³⁸But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ³⁹For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. ⁴⁰There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. ⁴¹There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

⁴²So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. ⁴⁶But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. ⁴⁷The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. ⁴⁸As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. ⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. ⁵⁰I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

⁵¹Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. ⁵⁴When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. ⁵⁵O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?' ⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Death will someday be swallowed up in victory!

6. Hope

As ones who belong to Christ, we have great hope. "Our life is hid with Christ in God; when Christ who is our life appears, then we also will appear with Him in glory!" (Colossians 3:3-4) Our hope is not a hope that says "I wish" or "maybe", but a hope that says "definitely" – it is promised! Listen again to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18...

"But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; ¹⁷then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord. ¹⁸Therefore comfort one another with these words."

ALL THIS IS TRUE! It is not just wishful thinking – it is going to happen! God has given us His Holy Spirit in our lives as a guarantee. "In Him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory." (Ephesians 1:13-14) He has also given us the guarantee of eternal life by raising His Son, the Lord Jesus, from the dead. "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through His Spirit which dwells in you." (Romans 8:11)

Jesus Himself said to Mary & Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26) God has promised us eternal life – I will hope in His Word: "And this is what He has promised us, eternal life." (1 John 2:25)

7. No Fear

Jesus does not want us to fear the physical death of our mortal, temporal bodies. He said very clearly in Luke 12:4-7...

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. ⁵But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him! ⁶Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. ⁷Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

In 64 of the 66 books of the Bible, God tells us not to fear, using phrases like “Fear not”, “Do not fear”, “Have no fear”, “Do not be afraid”. We have great hope through faith in Christ! 1 John 4:18 says, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.”

Jesus came to take away our fear of the death of our physical bodies. Hebrews 2:14-15 says,

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”

I heard a story of an older brother in Christ who decided that when he turned 80, he would spend three hours alone with the Lord each day meditating/reflecting on God’s Word, focusing on praise, worship and prayer, developing His closeness to God. He went home to be with the Lord when he was 83, and right before his departure, he said, “I wish I had started spending more time with the Lord earlier in my life. I feel so close to Him. I have no fear, but only a sense of His perfect love for me!”

8. Serving

As one who belongs to Christ, I’ve given my life to serving Him, to partnering with the Holy Spirit that others may come to know the Lord Jesus. Why should that cease while I’m going through the death of my physical body? One of the verses God gave me in my game plan for the cancer surgery was Matthew 16:25, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” I felt the Lord telling me to focus on the people God brought into my path as a result of my surgery, and seek to encourage them and trust God to use me in some way in their lives. I found as I did that during my entire surgery experience, I had very little fear, and a deep sense that God was with me.

There will also be others who are suffering because of the physical death of my body. I will need to minister to them as I can during that time. In Genesis 49, Jacob took time to bless his sons before he died. In 2 Samuel 17:23, when Ahithophel knew his death was eminent, he set his house in order (he served those who were left behind). I believe God will use my life up to the moment I go home to be with Him to minister to those around me.

Some final thoughts...

I am looking forward to going home to be with my Lord! I have often felt like a pilgrim in this life, traveling the roads of this world, but finding that nowhere do I feel like I am truly at home. I've also seen that the things of this world can never satisfy my deepest longings. But I have also tasted the goodness and love of the Lord in this life as I've walked with Him and trusted Him along the way, and it is amazing, far better beyond anything that this world has to offer.

The grace and love of God that we experience in this life is a "foretaste of glory divine" as the old hymn proclaims. I choose to believe God's Word when it says, "...God has raised us up with Him (Jesus Christ) and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus". (Ephesians 2:6-7)

God gives us a strong reminder and promise in 1 John 2:15-17, "Never give your hearts to this world or to any of the things in it. A man cannot love the Father and love the world at the same time. For the whole world-system, based as it is on men's primitive desires, their greedy ambitions and the glamour of all that they think splendid, is not derived from the Father at all, but from the world itself. *The world and all its passionate desires will one day disappear. But the man who is following God's will is part of the permanent and cannot die*". (J.B. Philips paraphrase)

I choose to believe God's promises by faith that the goodness I've tasted in this life will only be magnified beyond anything we could even imagine in the life to come. "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him..." (1 Corinthians 2:9) "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord." (Psalm 27:13-14)

In the movie *The Return of the King* from the Lord of the Rings series, when Bilbo is getting ready to step onto the ship that will sail off into the sunset (an allegorical picture of death, of departing this world), he turns to his friends and with a smile of anticipation says, "I'm ready for another adventure!"

And in the book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* from the Chronicles of Narnia series, when they had sailed to the end of the world, and Aslan the great Lion (an allegorical picture of the Lord Jesus) invites Reepicheep, the valiant mouse warrior, to come home to His country, Reepicheep trembles with great joy anticipating all that is awaiting him. *Lord, may you give me the same unbridled excitement as these two allegorical friends on the day you call me home, because I know it's all true!* As I heard a speaker once say, "Tell yourself three things everyday: I'm greatly loved, I'm never alone, and all God's promises are true."

I've chosen to walk by faith in God every day of my life, and in the same way, I'm trusting God to guide me through my last days here on earth before I go to be with Him forever. None of us can choose our day of death, but I know that "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints". (Psalm 116:15) Romans 8:38-39 says very clearly that death (or anything else for that matter) cannot separate us from the love of God. So, when

my day comes to depart and be with the Lord, by God's grace, I want to be prepared like the five wise maidens who had their lamps burning when the Bridegroom came for them. (Matthew 25:1-13)

When I turned 40, I started asking the Lord to give me a special verse from the Bible every year for my birthday. Each year, a month or two before my birthday, I begin looking as I spend time in the Bible or listen to a sermon. God has given me some encouraging verses, but one of the best was on my 50th birthday. The passage is Psalm 73:23-24 (NIV), "Yet I am always with You: You hold me by my right hand, You guide me with your counsel, and afterward You will take me into glory." What a wonderful promise! Nothing can snatch me out of God's hand or take me away from His presence. His plan is to take me into glory with Him after this life is over, "salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory" as it says in 2 Timothy 2:10.

I'd like to encourage you to memorize Psalm 73:23-24, and also the two other passages from the Bible listed below – 1 John 5:11-13 and Psalm 23. Knowing God's promises is what gives us hope when the storms of life surge. In the book *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, the character Christian comes to the river of death on his journey of life. He can see the city of God on the other side with all its glory, but he has to cross the river first. As he is crossing, he finds that as long as he keeps his eyes on the city in front of him, the waters do not overwhelm him and his crossing is victorious, arriving safely with great rejoicing on the other side. I believe that seeking to know the Lord Jesus, reflecting on His promises often and what is to come, will give us the same experience. May these verses be an anchor to our soul when the days come to face crossing the river of our physical death. Praise God for His gift of eternal life!

1 John 5:11-13 – "And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life. ¹³I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."

Psalm 23 (NASB)

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.

³He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Note: All Bible verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV) or the Revised Standard Version (RSV) unless otherwise noted. NIV is the New International Version. NLT is the New Living Translation. NASB is the New American Standard Bible. NLV is the New Living Version.