The Power of Remembrance in the Face of Death

by PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

I have not been able to stop thinking about a friend who recently died of cancer. He was not my best friend—but we had known each other since the first grade. He entered life the same time that I had, and now he has left it. I keep asking myself the same question over and over, “How is he already gone?” He was thirty-one years old. I am thirty-one years old.

Death is always hard to accept, but I think it is especially difficult when the person who dies is the same age as you. If the person is much older, then death seems like a sad inevitability. If the person is much younger, then death is an unspeakable tragedy. But for someone my own age to die—that brought me special terror. I will die. And you will too. We will be taken away from all we know and love.

One author describes death this way.

After decades of superefficient operation, that great engineering marvel—your human body—will shut down and cease thousands of functions in a matter of minutes. Your heart muscle will stop pumping and masses of neurons in the brain will switch off. Your body’s core temperature will cool and...
rigor mortis will begin. What then becomes of the unseen essence of you?\textsuperscript{1}

This physical description of death is unsettling, but the author’s final question is even more so. What becomes of our souls? Where will the unseen essence of “me” end up? Where is the essence of my friend right now? In my head, I can still hear the cough-like sound of his laugh and see the wrinkles in his forehead when he furrowed his brow. But where is he?

Not being able to answer that question is disturbing, isn’t it? Faith holds us up. But strong columns of faith that we have built over the years can start to crack and crumble because of death’s quake. Moments before I learned of my friend’s death I was steady and certain. In the next instant, I felt feeble and frail.

I don’t think my reaction was unusual, but it did catch me off guard. I am a Christian. In fact, I’m a Christian who has spent several years studying theology so I could learn more about what I believe and why I believe it. At the core of these beliefs is my faith in the resurrected Christ of Scripture. I believe he conquered death by crushing the head of a seditious serpent. I believe that death has lost its sting because my life is hidden in Christ who rose from the grave (1 Cor 15:55; Col 3:3). Death cannot harm me anymore, at least not in any lasting sense. So shouldn’t I be more secure in death’s presence?

The truth is that studying theology does not guarantee emotional security. Being informed isn’t a cure-all for spiritual instability. The faith in which we believe is a reservoir of truth about God. But the faith that believes is a muscle that must be worked consistently. I had forgotten this, and when I learned of my friend’s death, I saw how weak my faith was.

Troubled by this, I began to think more deeply about two questions. First, why do we feel uneasy about death? Death is inevitable. We all know it’s in our future, and we’re constantly reminded of it. Yet when it comes close to us, it still assaults our sense of security. Why? Second, given that we react to death in this way, what can we do to steady our faith so that we can stand boldly before this assailant? I thought about these two questions as I reread the story of Lazarus’s resurrection in John 11. Let’s start with the first one.

\textsuperscript{1} Michael Allen Rogers, \textit{What Happens after I Die?} (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 22.
Why does death rattle our sense of security? Let’s explore this question by beginning with two people shaken by death: Martha and Mary.

In response to their brother’s illness, they send for Jesus and ask for his help. But Lazarus dies before Jesus arrives, and the sisters’ response to his “late” arrival expresses the thievery of death that we all experience: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21, 32). Put differently, “Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have been stolen from us.”

Faith is not merely assent to the truth. It is a muscle that must be worked in the harsh spiritual environment of a sinful and threatening world.

Something in all of us screams out in opposition to death (Rom 5:14). We know it was not what God intended for the created order; instead it crept into his good world because of our sin. So when death confronts us, we look for hope, for something to tell us that it is not the period at the end of life’s sentence. And God has given us this hope by giving us himself. The one who stood before Mary and Martha was life and hope in the flesh (John 11:25). They had to lay hold of this person, this hope, by faith. But this is not as easy as it sounds. Faith is not merely assent to the truth. As we noted earlier, it is a muscle that must be worked in the harsh spiritual environment of a sinful and threatening world.

Before Mary arrives, Jesus challenges Martha’s faith with a declaration about himself that he follows with a personal question: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25–26). This question required her to put her faith in motion. Like exercise, this may have pained her at first, but it would strengthen her as she learned to wait for the fulfillment of Jesus’ words.

Let’s pause here. As we read this story, we cannot sit idly by and neglect to work our own muscle of faith. Do I believe this? Do you believe that those who put their hope and trust in the Son of God will never die? If you
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