

GLEANINGS — April 5, A.D. 2015

That Final Appointment

Some time ago the brother of a friend collapsed, was rushed to the hospital for emergency treatment, and died at twenty-three years of age. There had been no warning, no previous knowledge of the hidden heart condition which an autopsy revealed. Tragic incidents such as this one are, sadly, all too familiar to many of us.

All of the living are inexorably moving toward death. We do well to consciously consider its inevitability, that we may be prepared. This should not envenom us with undue gloom. A perpetually melancholy countenance is as unproductive as ignoring death is foolish – it steals the present joy of God's wonderful gift of life. How, then, can we be ready to meet "the grim reaper" with peace and hope?

Most often we check ourselves if we begin to contemplate our own demise. We quickly put aside "what if..." thoughts that present us with prospects of incurable disease, sudden accidents, or scenarios wherein we become the victim of any one of an assortment of human cruelties. Dismissing the idea, we let ourselves expect a quiet departure, asleep in our own beds. But does the end of earthly life EVER come as we hope?

Perhaps those fractions of a second before the head on collision crushes the skull or severs the spine are like dream time. Our dreams compress days, weeks, years into seconds. Perhaps the mind thinks on for a few moments when the heart muscle is suddenly stilled forever. Are those moments filled with seeming hours of mental activity?

In another respect, the inward life at the time of death might differ radically from "dream time". In dream time, the bizarre and surreal reign. By contrast, perhaps a startling clarity of thought is present as the soul realizes that death has arrived. The point is that what we believe in, value, and meditate upon now will fill our hearts immediately preceding our entry into eternal bliss or eternal agony. It is those beliefs, values, and habitual meditations which will determine if we face the moment of death with horrified terror or calm courage.

Let us then, in seeking to be prepared to die, first abandon the way of the ostrich with her head in the sand. The idea of quietly slipping away into oblivion is a lie. The going may be only physically quiet, and our conscious personality, our spirit or soul, will never be annihilated. Squarely facing this is step number one.

It is Jesus Christ who offers the solid truth which we can believe in, value, and meditate upon. The forgiveness of all the wrong we have done was given by His sacrifice of Himself in death. His return from the grave declares His conquest of death, which we suffer as the just penalty for sin. Jesus lives now, never more to die, to bring those who trust Him to eternal life. If you have never sought Him, now is the time to do so; this is step number two.

For those who have this Christian hope, step number three is to think accordingly, to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. With Gospel hope one can be unterrified by death. Here are a few concrete ways to apply this.

Cultivate the habit of thinking about eternity, and relate this life's transitory brevity to the unending glory of the redeemed. Far from producing eccentric, out of touch persons hoping for "pie-in-the-sky", this spiritual exercise yields a realistic outlook on life. It gives to those who practice it a true perspective on their existence, and real peace of mind. The apostle Paul, whose New Testament letters evidence a mind much occupied with eternity, was able to say that "to depart and be with Christ is far better...to die is gain."

Consider how death has come to others. The last words of Steven were a prayer for forgiveness for those hurling his death at him, and asking that God "receive his spirit". Accounts of Christian martyrs, such as those recorded in Foxe's Book of Martyrs, are unrivaled for the heaven-given courage they exude.

Nothing is easier or more natural than to avoid talking about death, to put off thinking about it until "tomorrow", to shield children from even the mention of the king of terrors. Nothing is ultimately more foolish or dangerous, either. Jesus came that He might rescue those who were subject to an emotional and mental bondage, the fear of death, all their lives (Hebrews 2:15). He lived, died, and rose from the dead...and He is gloriously alive forevermore!