

WHY DO YOU WEEP? *SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED?*

By Steve Zeisler

In his *Holy Sonnets* the great seventeenth-century British poet John Donne reflects on the truths of the gospel and praise of God. The most famous of these sonnets is the tenth. It's addressed to the grim reaper, death personified. It begins,

*"Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so."*

I invite you to have in your mind's eye death personified. The Scriptures describe death as the last great, inexorable foe of the human race and of the purpose of God. But death is not to be proud. There is One who is greater and mightier than this dread enemy.

Mark 5:35-43 is a story about a child who died. In it we're going to hear another of the questions of Jesus that we've been tracking in this series. Jesus asked penetrating questions that not only were pertinent at the moment, but they have a way of helping us examine ourselves today. We'll get to the question in a moment.

Let me begin by making some observations about death. Medical science is, of course, blurring the boundary between death and life with various advances. Sadly, medical science is also making human beings better at killing as well as extending life. Indeed the progress of medical science sometimes leads to absurdities. Below is a quote from a legal transcript in the Massachusetts Bar Association's *Lawyer's Journal*, submitted in a letter to *National Review* (1:)

"Q: Doctor, before you performed the autopsy, did you check for a pulse?
A: No.
Q: Did you check for blood pressure?
A: No.
Q: Did you check for breathing
A: No.
Q: So then it is possible that the patient was alive when you began the autopsy.
A: No.
Q: How can you be so sure, Doctor?
A: Because his brain was sitting on my desk in a jar.
Q: But could the patient be alive nevertheless?
A: It is possible that he could have been alive and practicing law somewhere."

In spite of this silliness, and however the boundary between life and death is blurred, it remains the case that we each face the certainty of our own death.

THE FINAL ENEMY

Psychologists have studied the process of grieving a death. When we get the news that someone we love has died or is going to die, or our own life is to be forfeit, there is a predictable grieving process. It begins with denial and

shock, which are followed by anger, bargaining, guilt, depression, loneliness, and finally acceptance. It is tragic that the process ends with acceptance, if all we have is the study of psychologists to go on, because what is accepted is that death always triumphs. Whatever anger, denial, or bargaining we engage in, they are like waves against a great rock that matter not at all. All of our emotional turmoil finally ends up with our having to bow before the final enemy and say, "You win."

Every culture has ways of helping people go through the process of bowing their knee before the great foe – procedures for ending a life and disposing of the body in burial or cremation. You may have seen last week's news of the services held for the two officers who were killed in the line of duty in the Capitol. A thousand vehicles proceeded into Arlington Cemetery attending their burial. Eulogies and honor guards lend some solace to those who grieve, but they also salute the power of death.

We're going to see in the passage before us a way of mourning that existed in Palestine in the first century. Professional mourners would gather around and play flutes, wail, and act out a stylized sadness. This story, however, has something else to say about life and death. Let's read Mark 5:35-43:

While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?"

Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha koum!*" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!") Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

WHAT VOICE WILL WE LISTEN TO?

Jesus' question was directed to the mourners, not the other people in this story-his disciples and the grieving family. The role of mourners was to insist that everyone pay homage to the facts: Death had won again. A beautiful little girl's life was forfeit, and they all had to bow before reality. The final enemy had claimed another victim. But Jesus challenged the mourners.

The question he asked the mourners is more obscure than the other questions we've looked at in this series (Discovery Papers [4569-4573](#) to date). "Why all this commotion and wailing?" In that culture there were no telephones, email, or other ways of getting the word out. When someone died, professional mourners would gather and a wail would start. They probably had been standing by, since this was a prominent man and his daughter had been sick. As soon as she died, they would have started playing the instruments, crying aloud, throwing dust in the air, and tearing their clothing. Thus word would begin to spread that the child had died.

We see a tension beginning in verse 35 when some men from among these mourners came from the house and said very matter-of-factly to the synagogue ruler, "Your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?" That is, "Let's face this terrible reality. Jesus has nothing left to say. Leave behind the rabbi and his religious instruction. It's all useless in the face of death. Maybe the spokesmen for God have something to say when there is still reason to hope, but there is no reason to hope. The child is dead." Jesus deliberately ignored them and challenged what

they said. He turned to the heartbroken father and urged him to believe rather than despair.

So the tension is, Who are we going to listen to—the voice that is announcing the victory of the grim reaper, insisting that we bow before him; or the voice of Someone else who says, "Don't be afraid; rather, believe"?

Let me clarify that the issue here is not grief. Grief in the face of death is always appropriate. Sorrow, confusion, numbness of heart and mind, questioning, loneliness—none of the emotions that go with losing someone you love were in view when Jesus challenged these professional mourners.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13 Paul writes, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." The statement there is not, "Don't grieve." Paul's point is that you should not grieve *hopelessly*. Jesus, you remember, cried at the tomb of Lazarus. Even knowing that Lazarus would be given life again for some years to follow, Jesus wept. He wept for the loneliness that people experience when a beloved one is taken. But the calling for Christians is not to break down in the face of the final enemy's awful death's-head smile and his claim, "I win." The challenge of faith is to acknowledge our hurt, but not give way to hopelessness.

THE TENDERNESS AND THE SEVERITY OF JESUS

There are two ways I'm going to ask you to look at the ministry of Jesus in this story. One is the tenderness with which he cares for the family, and the other is the severity with which he treats the mourners. Both of them show us something important to believe about him.

Let's consider the kindness of the Lord. He was tender with this father who had just heard that his child had died. The father's heart must have sunk like a stone. He had hoped that Jesus would get there before the child died. Now it was too late. The man didn't see any miracle to believe in, only the word of the Lord. "Trust me; I have something left for you. This is not the end of the story."

We see the kindness and gentleness of the Lord in the room where the little girl lay on her bed deceased. He took her by the hand. I've mentioned before how easily Jesus ignored all the laws of ritual cleanness (Discovery Paper 4573). Touching a dead body would have rendered him unclean. But of course this body was not going to stay dead for long. Then he used a wonderful phrase in Aramaic, the language of the household, of the townspeople, not the language of commerce and the wider world. As Peter told Mark this story, and it was recalled by the disciples, they couldn't help but repeat the phrase Jesus used because it was so touching: "*Talitha kum!*"—"Dear little girl, get up!"

Commentators have made some wonderful observations about this phrase. This child had probably heard the phrase, "Little girl, get up!" scores of times in her life. When she was just learning to walk as a toddler, stumbling and falling to the ground, her parents would reach down and say, "Dear little one, get up!" as they helped her up. And as a youngster she would sometimes want to stay in bed when she should have been up doing something else, and her parents would lovingly say, "Dear little one, get up!" People who loved her would have often said, "*Talitha kum!*" So when Jesus touched her and spoke these words to her, they were the tender words that someone who cared for her would say.

The last observation we can make about Jesus' tender care for these people is that it was he who was sensitive enough to ask that she be given something to eat. This child had been sick for some time and had probably not been able to get nourishment regularly. She would have needed something to eat. Everyone else was so shocked by what happened that they didn't even think about it. But the Lord stayed tenderly focused on her needs.

All of this is to make a point. When we are in extreme situations, when death itself threatens and all seems lost, when we seem gripped by the power of the final enemy to destroy and blight our existence, when we find ourselves desperate and falling and hopeless, there is wonderful theology that can be brought to bear: the great themes of heaven, eternal life, the victory gained when Jesus was raised from the dead, and so on. But it's also important to have the tender touch, the intimacy of Jesus, knowing that he is with us even though we're going

through "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4). We can call on Someone who is present, strong, caring, and understanding, and who even remembers that we need something to eat.

The other ministry of Jesus in this text is his challenge to the mourners. I don't think he had any particular grievance with them as individuals, but he was denying the role they were playing in the drama, urging acceptance of the loss of everything. They were advocating a kind of emotional acquiescence that says, "There's no reason to appeal to God or those who teach in his name. It's time for us to do the hard work of giving death its due." In that sense Jesus refused them. He ignored them, he challenged them, they in turn ridiculed him, and he subsequently threw them out.

We need to see the Lord here as directly opposing proud death, personified for us in John Donne's sonnet. Almost always in Scripture when there is a crisis moment, it takes place in a face-to-face confrontation between the champion of heaven and the destroyer with his lies. It happened in the Garden when Eve was faced with the tempter and she and then Adam fell before his persuasion (Genesis 3). Jesus stood face-to-face with that same tempter in the wilderness immediately after he was baptized (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:13; Luke 4:1-13). God commanded Moses to go into Pharaoh's court and stand by himself with only his brother as his second in the duel, facing the power of Egypt and the authority of Pharaoh. It happened when a shepherd boy named David took only five stones and a sling out to face the giant on a plain between the Israelite and Philistine armies (1 Samuel 17). The champion of heaven had to stand there against the reviler. It happened when Elijah stood on Mount Carmel by himself against four hundred priests of Baal. (1 Kings 18). Elijah was the champion of heaven, telling the truth into the darkness.

That is the way Jesus is presented in this story. He was throwing down a gauntlet, saying, "Proud death, I'm coming for you. There is going to come a day on a hill outside Jerusalem not many months from now when we're going to fight to the end. And I want you to know right now I'm giving life back to a beloved child for a family of people I care about, and I'm doing it deliberately to say, 'You don't win.' The end of the story is not death. The final enemy is not the champion."

"DON'T BE AFRAID; JUST BELIEVE"

Jesus made two statements in this text that we can benefit from practically. The first is in verse 36. Jesus' word to the father was, "Don't be afraid; just believe." The writer of Hebrews makes an interesting point about the fear of death: "Since the children have flesh and blood, [Christ] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15). When we assume that the grim reaper stands at the end of every life claiming it, destroying all that has gone before, when there is no reason for hope, then we live in fear of the end. It casts a terrible shadow backward from our future to our present. We're afraid that the love we experience, the friendships we have, our accomplishments will be lost and forgotten someday, and the bodies that serve us now will decay and will grow less and less useful to us. So we become willing to do anything, to listen to any kind of lie or foolishness that will numb the fear of the death that awaits us. Our enemy uses our fear to ruin us even further.

When we have One who is greater than death on our side, when we don't have to fear what's before us, when we know for sure that all the best things that have ever happened in our life are going to last forever, that the love relationships we have in Christ go on and on, that nothing of eternal consequence is ever lost to us, then instead of living in fear, we can live in confidence. When we see things begin to break down and we realize we're nearer the day that we'll be with the Lord, we can be optimistic and hopeful instead of afraid.

One of the subplots in Walt Disney's version of *Peter Pan* is of Captain Hook and the crocodile. At some point in his life, Captain Hook's hand was bitten off by a crocodile, and the crocodile liked the taste of it so much that he spent the rest of his life pursuing Captain Hook, wanting to eat the rest of him. Now, the crocodile had also swallowed an alarm clock, and he made a ticking noise everywhere he went. And at various points in the story, Captain Hook would hear a ticking noise, and it would terrify him. He would run scared and lose his bearings because the ticking noise always meant that the crocodile that was going to destroy his life was nearby.

That is the way the fear of death operates in us. Something reminds us that the "crocodile" is going to "eat" us someday, and we act foolishly. Instead of being firm, steady, and confident in the Lord, we find ourselves willing to do terrible, destructive, embarrassing things.

Jesus' word to the father is also a wonderful word to us: "Don't be afraid; just believe." There's a champion fighting for us who is greater than the enemy who wants to destroy us.

"THE CHILD IS NOT DEAD BUT ASLEEP"

The other statement to note is in verse 39: "The child is not dead but asleep." Now, she was dead. It wasn't as if this child was just in a deep coma (which Jesus knew but no one else did) and he was going to revive her. The word "slumber" or "sleep" is used this way many times in the Bible. We read it in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 earlier. Jesus also used it of Lazarus (John 11:11).

Jesus said the child was asleep as a direct contradiction to the mourners who came in verse 35 and said, "Your child is dead, forget the rabbi." The story would have a future. This little girl was going to be given back her life.

Believing people can and should use the term "sleep" to talk about brothers and sisters who have died. If they are asleep, they can wake up. They have not expired. We are merely deprived of their company temporarily. Jesus' language of death clearly implied, even demanded, a day to come when the dead will awaken, and everything will be made new. Jesus was urging his people who love him to believe that he would triumph, not the grim reaper.

*"Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so."*

The people we love who are in Christ and who are no longer with us, will be with us again. Jesus said in John 14:2-3, "...I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." The condition of heaven is that we'll be together forever. We grieve because everyone must grieve when their heart is broken, but we don't have to grieve as hopeless people. We can be filled with confidence that heaven's Champion won the greatest of all the confrontations. Jesus gave his life and was raised from the dead. Life wins and death loses. That changes everything, not only about the people we love who have died, because we know we'll be with them again, but about how we live our own life now. We don't live fearfully. We have the option of living confidently, aggressively, hopefully, optimistically, enthusiastically, waiting for the day, excited about life to the very end when we fall asleep, knowing that we will wake again.

John Donne's sonnet ends with these lines:

*"Death thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell;
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke. Why swellst thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die."*

Below are some of the very last words of Scripture we have about the human condition in the future that will last forever. The apostle John ends his Revelation with a description of the new heavens and new earth, when, having awakened forever, we participate in the re-creation of everything, and life that is forever begins. Revelation 21:1:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He

will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life....''

NOTES

1. *National Review*, August 3, 1998, p. 18

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Steve Zeisler
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