

DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY

SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH

By Steve Zeisler

Below is a letter written to online advice columnist Cary Tennis. His column is called *Since You Asked*.

“July 12, 2007 | Dear Cary,

“I am an average 38-year-old man with a good, calm, life. No drama to speak of. “I’ve been a nonbeliever in Christianity since the sixth grade, and an atheist since high school. As a ‘good’ atheist, I know that my lack of religion isn’t supposed to be a problem for me. My life is supposed to have just as much meaning and beauty in it as a believer’s, and the fact that there is no such thing as a spiritual world isn’t supposed to bother me one bit.

“But it does. For many years I never thought much about the consequences of my atheism, but as the years go by it sinks in more and more, and very gradually I’m losing any sense of purpose in my life, and even my ability to enjoy the things I once did. It’s truly horrifying for me to understand, viscerally, that someday I and everyone and everything I love will be gone forever.

“If I could flip a switch in my brain that would instantly make myself believe that there’s a loving god out there who will someday reunite me with my loved ones, I would do it, in order to live out my days with some peace and purpose, however illusory. It sounds crazy, but it’s really how I feel.

“I don’t know anything about your spiritual beliefs, or lack thereof, but I’d be interested to hear your thoughts on my situation.”

“— E.D. (Existential Depression) Sufferer” (1)

In 1 Corinthians 15:26 death is called the last enemy to be abolished. Death is the most intractable enemy to living as God intended us to live, to experiencing the fullness of the gospel in the presence of God and love for each other. The power of death is evident in this letter, in people we know, and probably in our own lives. Death is not just the end of the story that we’ll have to face someday. It works its way backward into our lives. This sentence is a powerful expression of that: “It is truly horrifying for me to understand, viscerally, that someday I and everyone and everything I love will be gone forever.”

We’ve been working our way through Hebrews 11. We began in the last message (Discovery Paper 5244) with verse 13, which says of the people the writer has been talking about, “All of these died in faith, without receiving the promises....” There is a literary pattern in Hebrews 11 in which every memory of the Old Testament is introduced with the phrase “by faith”: “By faith Abel...By faith Enoch...By faith Noah...” But the writer breaks the pattern in verse 13 to talk

about a problem. He has been proclaiming the advantages of the life of faith in the presence of God, reasons for hope and obedience. But if the specter of death is raised, doesn't that cancel it all? Doesn't it reduce the life of faith to fairy tales? It's great to talk about the Old Testament saints, but they all died. Doesn't death somehow terribly destroy everything? But the writer insists that it does not, and there are two reasons why.

We talked about the first reason in the last message. Living this life by faith makes us long for more. It makes us believe in beautiful things we've never seen. And because the life of faith teaches us to hunger for something that we'll never experience on this earth, we begin looking for the place where it exists, and then we discover off in the distance a city unlike any city in this world, a city with foundations that will last forever, whose builder and maker is God. Therefore death doesn't end anything. It's actually a doorway into the fulfillment that we most deeply want.

But there's another perspective on death, and that's the one we'll take up in this message. It has to do with a statement that the writer of Hebrews made in 2:15. He said those who are afraid to die are slaves all their lives, dancing to the tune of the evil one. Death enslaves us to sin and to the devil. But we who have discovered freedom in Christ, who are living this life to the full and looking forward to the next life, can help those around us who are still enslaved. We participate in the defeat of death by helping give away life to those who don't experience it yet.

Let's read Hebrews 11:17-22:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

These are all stories of individuals in an older generation passing on truth to those who are coming after them. In each case the patriarchs are looking beyond death in the experience of their progeny. Our text has three parts. The theme of the first part is worship; the theme of the second, giving a blessing to children or grandchildren; and the theme of the third, self-definition.

Let's look at the first one.

Leading our children into worship

Again, verses 17-19: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called.' He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type." Genesis 22, in which this account is

given to us, records one of the most remarkable stories in the Bible. It is mysterious, pointing to truths it does not explain, and it is often misunderstood. At the beginning of Genesis 22 God speaks to Abraham, as he did at the beginning of Abraham's story in chapter 12. In both cases God tells him to go to a place that he will make known later. And the journey begins. In the first case God tells Abraham to leave the family he was born into and take a journey to a promised land. In this case God tells him to go with his son to a place that he will discover as he travels.

A second observation we can make in Genesis 22 is that worship is at the heart at what is to take place. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son on an altar. Clearly that raises the subject of worship, or profound attention to God. The place to which they're going will be filled with God's presence. It will be filled with listening to God and responding to God, acting as they are called to, and entering into nearness to God—no multitasking, no side trips for sightseeing, no commerce along the way. God himself will be the subject of this journey.

The third thing we can say about Genesis 22 is that it was never about sacrificing a human child, about Abraham's losing Isaac. We know from the whole Old-Testament story that the killing of one's child to appease a bloody and angry god was never allowed (Jeremiah 7:30-31). It was anathema to the people of God. Abraham knew that Yahweh whom he served would never call for such a thing. Abraham knew he was not going to end this journey with Isaac's life forfeit to him forever in death. But he didn't know what God meant when he said, "Take your son and offer him as a burnt offering." Why would God paint such a picture, or speak of things? Why did he call Abraham on this journey? There was some awful thing that was taking place here, and he had to be willing to go there with God.

What is ultimately at the heart of the Genesis 22 account is a lesson about God and his Son. It says in Hebrews 11:19 that Abraham believed in resurrection as a result of this day. Somehow Abraham learned some of what we know much more clearly looking back: A day was coming when the Father would give up the life of his Son. On this very hill Jesus' cross would one day stand, and he would die willingly for us. Abraham's son Isaac did not die, but God was calling Abraham close to his own heart. In this worship Abraham and Isaac were introduced to what God would someday experience.

We have a lot to learn about the nature of worship in this chapter. Worship involves sacrifice, giving up what matters most to us, making offerings to God as God extends grace to us. It's about setting aside a place and time, perhaps an extended time, when God has all of our attention, not just some of it. We're used to worship that is rather shallow, quickly accomplished, and predictable. Yet there's nothing like that in this text. Worship is about entering God's story, not just inviting him into ours.

It says that figuratively speaking, Abraham did lose his son to death and receive him back in resurrection. Again, this is not because the boy actually died, but because offering up what matters most to you and receiving it back from God is at the heart of what it means to worship God.

This mysterious, overwhelming story has fascinated commentators in every generation. But for our purposes, I suggest we focus not on the events that took place, but on the observation that

Abraham was with his son. We'll focus on the gift of one generation to another. Shortly after this journey Abraham's story in Genesis is over. Every important episode of his life was past now, and at the end he took his son with him into a place where they encountered God. Isaac learned to worship the God whom his father knew and loved. This is a very important challenge to those of us who have walked with the Lord awhile: to pass on as a gift what it means to know God, what it means to worship, how we have been shaped because of nearness to God. It is to take those who are younger with us into God's presence.

Young people often make fun of older folks. I remember thinking of my parents as clueless and out of it. Older people often don't know what's current or cool. But there's one thing about older people that will never be ridiculed by the young: their life in God's presence. What's true the longer you live, if you listen and respond, is that you go deeper with God. I don't think I've ever observed an occasion when a young person saw a godly, older saint and ridiculed their faith. It's what we respect most about those who have lived awhile.

Perhaps you had grandparents who prayed for you. I've talked to folks who lived for some period of time in the wilderness, wandered away from God and made a wreck of their lives, and what brought them back is that they remembered their grandparents who knew and loved God, who sang hymns from the old country in a language they couldn't understand, who prayed every day, who were faithful in the Scriptures. And it was something about their praying grandparents that awakened faith in them. They had run from God for a long time, but they couldn't deny that their grandparents' faith was true and real. They respected it.

Bob Roe was a pastor and elder here for many years, and his wife Mary Lou is still a dear saint in the life of this church. Bob Roe used to have a Bible that was impossible for anyone else to read, because he had written so many notes in it, and made so many circles and arrows and highlights and underlines, and he'd read it so long, and it was so fragile. Bob's Bible was like an archeological dig! It had twenty or thirty years of notes in it. This was a Bible that had been loved, listened to, believed, read, prayed over, and cried over for a very long time. And the faith to which Bob's Bible testified was an inspiration to younger believers.

I spent part of the summer I was sixteen working at a Young Life camp in Colorado. The founder of the mission, Jim Rayburn, was retired from the presidency of Young Life, and he was no longer in active ministry, but he still lived in Colorado. One night the work crew kids were invited to spend an evening with Jim. We sat on the floor in a big room, and he told us stories of what God had done in earlier generations, and at the end of the evening he prayed for us. I remember thinking what a privilege that was—hearing of God's faithfulness from a disciple who had served him well for a long time. Abraham's journey with his son into God's presence is a great version of the same kind of gift.

Passing on a blessing to our children

The second part of our text is verses 20-21: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff." The concept of blessing is important in Hebrew thought. It's more than giving a physical inheritance to your children.

One time I was at the home of Ron Ritchie, who used to be a pastor here and was influential in our church for a long time. Ron had some printed sermons out on his desk, and I asked what he was working on. He was compiling the sermons that he'd given over the years into a book, which he was going to have bound. He said he wanted to give them to his two sons. He wanted them to know something about who he was, what he stood for, and what mattered to him.

In other settings a dad will go out in the backyard and teach his son to throw a baseball. Or a musician might teach a child to find joy in playing an instrument. People who like backpacking will teach their children how to backpack. It's great to pass on whatever you're excited about to your children.

My mother is a great cook. She also has great insight on how table fellowship works, how much good occurs at family meals. She took funny stories about our family growing up and collected them into what we call Grandma Z's Cookbook. She's made copies for all of her children and grandchildren as a way of investing something good in us. It's a prized possession of ours.

As important as these gifts are, the Biblical concept of blessing goes deeper. It's giving away not just our skills, our enthusiasms, our personal history, a physical inheritance—it is also communicating confidence in the love of God. As much as children may receive from earthly parents, the gifts of their heavenly Father are greater. The patriarchal blessings in Genesis established their children as chosen by God and called to serve him.

The third part of our text has a theme of self-definition.

Teaching our children who we are

Verse 22: "By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones." Joseph's sons had been born in Egypt and had lived all of their lives there. They were Egyptians as far as they knew. Yet Joseph stood in the presence of his family, anticipating his death, and declared, "I am not an Egyptian, I am a son of Israel. Our people will return to our home one day." Joseph had been mistreated by his brothers during his days in Canaan, and had been a ruler of Egypt. But his identity and that of his family was determined by the word of God, not his status in the world.

Joseph's words can challenge us to make clear to the following generation that God has formed us and defined us. Instructions for burial serve to convey conviction about our core identity. What have we taught our children and grandchildren to value most?

It is difficult to approach these challenges with confidence. We weren't raised by model parents, we weren't ideal children, we are not being exemplary parents to the next generation of children. How can God work in these ways using broken vessels, failed humans?

We should remember that the patriarchs mentioned in these verses were also flawed people. Their faith in God's promises is commended to us, not their perfect life choices. God is able to

take vessels that are cracked and hurting and still give life away through them. And we can still help shape citizens for the city that is to come even though we're nowhere near perfect ourselves.

Ruth Bell Graham died recently. She suggested an epitaph for herself in one of her writings: "End of construction, thanks for your patience." She was giving a message to those who were coming next. Our whole life is a construction project. We're being prepared for the next place. And the patience we give one another is a good thing, but there's a hope in this that someone else will learn to be that kind of person, someone else will serve their generation and give life to the generation following them.

Notes

1. Letter reprinted by Cary Tennis, *Is Atheism Dead?*, © 2007, available at http://www.salon.com/mwt/col/tenn/2007/07/12/will_to_believe: internet.

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Sixth Message
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[Back to Index page](#)

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