

“The Last Enemy”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 8:48-59

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The Jewish opposition answered Jesus, “*We were right to say that you are a Samaritan and have a demon, weren’t we?*” “*I don’t have a demon,*” Jesus replied. “*But I honor my Father and you dishonor me. I’m not trying to bring glory to myself. There’s one who is seeking to glorify me, and he’s the judge. I assure you that whoever keeps my word will never look death in the face.*”

They said to Jesus, “*Now we know that you have a demon. Abraham and the prophets died, yet you say, ‘Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.’ Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died and the prophets died. Who do you think you are?*”

Jesus answered, “*If I glorify myself, my glory is worthless. My Father, who you say is your God, is the one who glorifies me. You don’t know him, but I do. If I said I didn’t know him, I would be like you, a liar. But I do know him, and I keep his word. Your father Abraham was overjoyed that he would see my day. He saw it and experienced the greatest joy.*”

“*You aren’t even 50 years old!*” they replied. “*Yet you say you’ve seen Abraham!*”

“*I assure you,*” Jesus replied, “*before Abraham was, I Am.*” So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and left the temple.

Common English Bible (adapted)

Here are some words of wisdom about death.

Susan Sontag:

*Death is the obscene mystery,
the ultimate affront,
the thing that cannot be controlled.*

Illness As Metaphor¹

Jean Cocteau

*The day of my birth, my death began its walk.
It is walking toward me, without hurrying.*

La Fin de Potomac

¹ Quoted in Fleming Rutledge, The Undoing of Death (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 272.

William Shakespeare

This fell sergeant, Death, is strict in his arrest.

Hamlet²

Bertrand Russell

*Brief and powerless is man's life;
on him and all his race the slow, sure doom
falls pitiless and dark.*

Philosophical Essays

J. K. Rowling

*Taunting Death . . . means pitting oneself
against a wily enemy who cannot lose.*

The Tales of Beedle the Bard

Woody Allen

*It's not that I'm afraid to die,
I just don't want to be there when it happens.*

Death: A Comedy in One Act

Fleming Rutledge

*Death is ugly, a rotten deal;
it is a cheat, a thief,
a grinning mockery — like a skull.*

The Undoing of Death³

Eugene Ionesco

*There are more dead people than living.
And their numbers are increasing.
The living are getting rarer.*

Rhinoceros

William Stringfellow

*Death is the obvious meaning of existence,
if God is ignored. . . .
Death is so great, so aggressive, so pervasive and so militant a power
that the only fitting way to speak of death
is similar to the way one speaks of God.
Death is the living power and presence in this world
which [pretends] to be God.*

Count It All Joy⁴

² Hamlet, Act 5, scene 2, line 345.

³ Ibid, 276.

⁴ Rutledge, 274.

Paul of Tarsus

In Adam, all die.

1st Corinthians 15:22a

II

Doesn't Jesus know all this? Doesn't Jesus know death's destructive finality, its relentless inescapability, its crushing ultimacy?

The folks confronting Jesus already think he's crazy. They've already accused him of having a heretical heritage and being devil-driven. Then he spouts out this: "*keep my word and never see death.*"

It is a nice sentiment, sure. Shall we add it to the buffet of other pleasant cliches we feed each other? We say all sorts of things, hoping to stuff the growling of death's sting. We swallow them through tightened lips on tear-streaked faces. These things we say are warm notions we wrap 'round cold facts. Does Jesus' "*keep my word and never see death*" belong on that unhelpful list?

Doesn't Jesus know death is 100 percent fatal?! The circumstances of its coming might be noble or shameful, spectacular or banal. But the finality is always the same, and the same for us all. No amount of handwashing away germs, healthy eating, daily exercise, sunscreen and safe driving will fend it off.

Each of us is in the ring with the Monster. We are swinging away, thinking that the blows we're landing are actually making a difference. The "Big D" just stands there, taking each punch, smiling, not swinging back. Waiting. The Monster knows that all will take is one of its counterpunches. Pow! We will go down for the count that never stops. And that punch will come. Doesn't Jesus know?

Even the greatest . . . Muhammad Ali died of septic shock. Julius Caesar: stabbed. Alexander the Great: fever or poison. Catherine the Great had a stroke while sitting on the toilet. Genghis Khan fell of his horse. Cleopatra: self-inflicted snake bite. Winston Churchill: stroke. Nelson Mandela: lung infection. Mahatma Gandhi: gunshot. Qin, the first Emperor of China: medication error. Muhammad the Prophet: fever. The Buddha: a stomach disorder. Death is very democratic. Doesn't Jesus know?

Even Abraham! Father Abraham. The Bible says he lived for 175 years. Whatever you make of that, he did not make 176. And all the prophets, through whose lips passed the calls of God? Each of their holy tongues is now but dried dust.

“Keep my word, and you will never look death in the face.” So says Jesus. Doesn’t he know?

III

Yes, Abraham died. But, first he saw. Jesus says, “*Father Abraham was overjoyed that he would see my day.*” Abraham anticipated the Messiah, the day of the Messiah’s coming.⁵ And he saw it! “*Abraham saw my day and experienced the greatest joy.*” He saw Jesus.

Abraham! Abraham, with whom God made the Covenant-Relationship. Abraham, who is the father of Israel, God’s Particular People. Jews, Christians, Muslims — we all greatly honour Abraham. Abraham, with whom God chose to begin setting the world right.

Jesus says that Abraham saw him. Abraham saw Jesus.

- Was it when God promised that through Abraham’s family all the earth’s families will be blessed?
- Or, when God promised Abraham — who was elderly and childless — that his family will be as numerous as stars in the sky?
- Or, when God promised Abraham’s at-that-point-non-existent family a home?
- Or, when Abraham cried with laughter at the absurdity of the promise?
- Or, when God promised to provide a lamb for the sacrifice, sparing Abraham’s son?
- Or, when Abraham trusted God?⁶

When did Abraham see Jesus?

Abraham saw God’s promise. He never saw it fulfilled. But he saw enough, enough of God, to trust God’s Promise. He saw God’s Promise that out of nothing, God saves everything. He saw God’s Promise that where is no way, God makes a way. He saw God’s Promise that when hope is laughable, God will join in the humour, then deliver the punch line. He saw God’s Promise that when God’s decree is so terrible and will destroy everything, is when God provides exactly what is needed to save everything.

Abraham saw enough of God, to see the Promise and trust it. And when Abraham saw God’s Promise, he saw Jesus.⁷

⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 553.

⁶ See Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5-6; 17:16-17; 22:14-17 and 22:18. I’ve taken this list from Bruner 556.

⁷ See Hebrews 11:1-19 and Romans 4 (especially verse 3, which references Genesis 15:6).

IV

“What?!?” they say . . . we say. “Abraham saw you? You’re not even 50 years old, Jesus!” Abraham lived some twenty centuries before Jesus. How could he have seen him?

Jesus’ answer blows things apart. “Before Abraham was . . . I Am.” I AM!

When God came to Moses, and Moses asked for God’s name, God said, “I AM!”⁸ Jesus’ opponents get it. He is calling himself the I AM. Blasphemy! Or, true!!

When Abraham saw God’s Promise, he was seeing God. Was he seeing Jesus? Is Jesus God’s Promise? Is he God’s Promise, kept?

I began with various quotes of death-wisdom. All those things about death’s destructive finality, death’s relentless inescapability, death’s crushing ultimacy, must be true. They must be . . . unless God is God, and Jesus is God’s Promise.

You know the death-wisdom. Here is the life-gospel, the Good News!

Paul of Tarsus:

The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

1st Corinthians⁹

Jesus is God’s Promise, and God’s Promise transcends this Last Enemy. God’s Promise existed before the Enemy began its rampage, because God is God. God will keep God’s Promise, because God is God. God’s Promise steps over the Enemy and crushes death down, because God is God, and Jesus’ is God’s Promise, kept.

He did this by entering into death itself. By choosing, by enduring, by submitting himself to its complete destructiveness, its absolute isolation, its soul-crushing abandonment . . . by facing death himself, God the Promise saved us from it. We need not be destroyed, isolated, abandoned.

Death is swallowed up in victory!

Death, where is your victory?

Death, where is your sting?” . . .

*God gives us the victory . . . the Promise . . . Jesus Christ.*¹⁰

⁸ Exodus 3:14. Translating the Hebrew phrase into English is difficult.

⁹ 1st Corinthians 15:26.

¹⁰ Paraphrase of 1st Corinthians 15:54-57.